The Way You Know Him

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The Way You Know Him

by Kaelie

Notes

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Prologue - June

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June

The taxi cab took a corner on two wheels and Justin cursed as he was flung against the side door. “Okay, Lance. Remind me -- what is this thing we’re going to?”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Do we really have to go through this again? Look, I told you I had to work this one night, just this one night while you were here,” he said with some exasperation. “I also told you that you didn’t have to come with me.”

“Hey,” Justin protested. “It’s not that I don’t want to go. I’m a good friend, I’m interested in your career and stuff.” He braced himself against the door as the cab driver took another corner. “What is it you do again?” he asked, and grinned when Lance elbowed him.

“Honestly, Justin, if you’re not going to be able to behave yourself, I’d rather you not be there,” Lance said, but he was smiling.

“Behave? What do you mean, behave?” Justin asked with mock indignation.

“No, I’m serious. This is my job, and these are people I work for, and I’m trusting you here. No insulting my co-workers, no flirting with my associates, no telling stories about what a dork I was at Harvard.” Lance’s voice was stern.

Justin smiled as he watched the city fly by his window, letting his eyes linger on the clean, wide sidewalks, the well-dressed people strolling past the windows. “If they knew what a dork you were, there's no way you'd get invited to a posh, high-class party in New York City.”

“It’s not that posh,” Lance answered absently, and Justin’s eyebrows went up.

“This looks pretty posh to me,” he muttered as Central Park came into view. Even in the dark this part of the park and the surrounding buildings looked beautiful. “Like I said, I can’t believe a dork like you knows someone who lives in a place like this.”

“I’m not a dork. And I don’t know him,” Lance said with some alarm. “I mean, I know of him, everyone knows of him, but I’ve never met him. I don’t think my boss has even met him. Maybe not even his boss.” Lance shifted and Justin realized he was nervous. “Remember, I told you that the firm I work for is sponsoring that opera fund raiser, and Mr. Chasez is hosting this cocktail party, I guess, to thank the firm, and yeah.” Justin watched in growing amusement as Lance brushed at the front of his coat and reached up to his throat to check the knot in his tie. “I would rather not go either,” he confessed. “But my boss seemed to think that he was doing me this huge favor including me in the invitation, and I couldn’t say no.” Now he sounded apologetic. “And I’m sorry. I know a night of watching me do some corporate ass kissing isn’t the way you wanted to spend your vacation.”

“It’s not a problem,” Justin said breezily. “And it’s not really a vacation. I mean, I had to job hunt and get an apartment and stuff.”

Lance grinned at him. “I still can’t believe you got that job, man. On the first interview.”

Justin smiled with a completely false modesty. “Oh, I was just lucky,” he said, and grinned when Lance laughed.

“Yeah right. Well, we should celebrate tomorrow night, for sure. Go out and do it right.”

Justin nodded. “Yeah, and you know what? I want to go to that club. That one you told me about.”

Lance raised his eyebrows. “Oh, that club?” he said, and glanced slyly at Justin. “Sure. We could do that. I’d imagine that even an ugly-ass hick boy like you could get some action there.” He leaned away as Justin threw a half-hearted punch.

“Watch it,” Justin threatened. “Be nice to me, or I’ll tell your boss about that time you ran naked through the park by Emerson Hall . . .” He trailed off as they pulled up to the front of a gorgeous high rise with a team of real, uniformed doorman. His smile dropped away. “Well,” he continued quietly. “I guess we’re going to get a look at how the other half lives, right? Like reverse slumming.”

Lance snorted as the door opened and he slid out of the cab behind Justin. “Yeah, right.” He bumped into Justin as he stood on the curb and they both froze. “Jesus,” Lance murmured, and Justin nodded in silent agreement as they took in the high, well-lit overhang, the spotless marble sidewalks. Another doorman held open the heavy beveled glass door and ushered them into a lobby that looked more like a five-star hotel than an apartment building.

“Damn,” Justin murmured in appreciation as Lance produced his invitation for inspection. “How did you say you know this guy again?” Lance rounded on him and he held up his hands. “Kidding, kidding,” he said, and smiled as Lance shook his head.

“I’m wishing I’d just told the boss I had plans tonight,” Lance muttered as they were shown toward the gleaming bank of elevators.

“It’s kind of intimidating,” Justin murmured back, making an effort to keep his jaw from gaping. The uniformed attendant informed the elevator operator that they were going to the Chasez penthouse and they were shown to a separate elevator. They watched in silence as the attendant keyed in a security code and the doors parted silently. For a moment Justin feared they were going to have to ride up with this strange, uniformed man, and he wondered wildly if they were supposed to give him a tip for letting them in his elevator.

But the man stepped aside without looking either of them in the eye, and they both relaxed as the doors closed behind them and left them alone in the large mirrored elevator. “Just think, a few more years of ninety-hour work weeks in your finance firm, and you’ll be the one with your own apartment -- uh, penthouse -- right here in this building.” Justin grinned as Lance laughed and shook his head.

“Seriously,” Lance whispered back. “I don’t know if I’d want to live in a place where the elevator attendants are this snooty.”

There were no numbers in this elevator but they seemed to climb forever. Justin couldn’t tell when the elevator began to slow; their only warning was a low, subtle chime before the doors slid silently open.

Justin’s first impression was of spacious and cool elegance -- the elevator opened directly into a large and high-ceilinged private foyer. Mahogany paneling gleamed with discreet touches of polished brass, the marble floor shined with polish, and glancing up Justin saw the high ceiling was actually a large, domed skylight. It must be stunning in the daytime, he thought.

Lance’s elbow brought him sharply back to the present and Justin realized they were not alone. A tall thin man -- good lord, a butler -- had apparently sprung up from the marble floor and was murmuring a greeting. He was actually helping Lance divest himself of his raincoat; Justin hastened to scramble out of his before the man could perform the same service for him. He took Justin’s worn but perfectly respectable coat with an air of disdain before directing them down the hallway, where sounds of a large crowd could be heard.

Lance straightened the knot of his tie as they walked and heaved a big sigh even as he pinned a smile to his face and waved to someone at the end of the hallway. “Remember,” he muttered at Justin. “Behave yourself.”

“Trust me,” Justin deadpanned, and snickered when Lance rolled his eyes.

The hallway ended with three wide stairs descending into a large room that was stunning in its bright illumination. Justin felt his mouth open in an O of appreciation as he took in the vaulted ceiling, white walls and two entire walls of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the mostly darkened central park and the lights of the city. The view was amazing. There was a fire crackling warmly in a large marble fireplace across the big room, glittering people in formal wear talking and laughing, uniformed caterers easing discreetly through the crowd with hors d’oeuvres and crystal flutes of champagne. The noise level was considerable, almost drowning out the small string quartet that played in a corner near the window.

“And there’s my boss. Here we go,” Lance muttered as he moved past Justin and greeted a tall, distinguished-looking man and his heavyset wife near the bottom of the stairs. For the next half an hour Justin followed Lance, smiling and shaking hands as he was introduced as Lance’s former college roommate, making small talk with Lance’s colleagues, speculating on the opera performance that was to be the culmination of the evening. After awhile Justin quietly extricated himself from a group of people talking enthusiastically about a new proposed federal tax break for nonprofits, and eased his way toward the nearest waiter with a tray of hors d’oeuvres. He was starving.

The caterer was a young and very pretty woman, and it was nothing to charm an entire plateful of finger food from her, along with two napkins and a very flirty smile. Justin gave her his brightest smile in return and moved slowly across the crowded room, taking care not to spill anything from his plate on the immaculate ivory carpet. His goal was the corner where the two huge walls of windows met, but the crowd seemed thickest there as people

congregated to enjoy the view. There was a long balcony outside too, he could see now that he was closer. It was a pity that the rain kept people from going outside to enjoy it.

The room was packed, and it was an effort for Justin to find an unobtrusive spot in which to get some serious eating done. His day had been a full one, beginning with the successful job interview in the morning and followed by the complications of securing his cousin's husband's Chelsea sublet in the afternoon. It was an incredible piece of luck that allowed him to get that apartment, but dealing with the paperwork had eaten up his day, and when he'd returned to Lance's apartment there had been just enough time to clean up and change before heading here. Breakfast had been a long time ago.

Justin gave up trying to find a flat surface on which to set his plate. He scooped up another canapé and stuffed it whole into his mouth, juggling the china plate and the napkin as he chewed hungrily.

An elegant crystal champagne glass filled with amber liquid appeared in the periphery of his vision and Justin froze. A voice, low and amused, said, "You know, I'd heard the food here was good, but I didn't think it could be that good."

His mouth full of hors d'oeuvre, Justin let his eyes travel slowly from the long, elegant fingers holding the glass, up the arm clothed in impeccable black cloth, to a handsome chiseled face with a full, soft looking mouth and a pair of gorgeous and coolly amused blue eyes. Justin swallowed his canapé whole and, mortified, felt himself start to cough.

The man transferred the glass to his other hand and gently thumped Justin on the back as he choked. "Easy, now," he murmured as Justin drew a deep and tortured breath of air. "Here," he said, and held out the glass to Justin. "Drink." Those full lips quirked into a half-smile that made Justin blink.

Justin took another deep breath and a healthy gulp of champagne, aware of the other man's blue eyes watching him intently. He cleared his throat and tried to speak.

"Thank you," Justin said, and tried a smile. He hoped the blue-eyed man would smile back.

He did, and it was a smile of astonishing charm, showing a glimpse of teeth under full, soft-looking lips and causing his eyes to scrunch in a way that made Justin's heart skip a couple of beats. "You're welcome," he murmured, his voice low and encouraging Justin to move closer. "It wouldn't do to have you keel over on the floor. Might ruin this nice party."

"Oh, we can't have that, now, can we," Justin commented just as quietly. He couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the other man's face, the clean and smooth lines of his cheekbones, the thick dark hair curling down to his collar. "I don't believe we've met," he said appreciatively, and as a waiter passed by he hastily rid himself of his plate and napkin. He held out his hand and gave the man his finest, slowest, brightest smile. "I'm Justin."

The man's smile widened a little and he never took his eyes from Justin's as he reached forward and slid his hand into Justin's outstretched one. His fingers closed firmly and oh-so-slowly around Justin's, pressing their palms together. "JC," he said in response, and when he drew his hand away Justin's heart was galloping. "And I think you're right. We haven't met."

“I would remember if we had,” Justin murmured, and JC’s smile sparkled with real amusement.

“Is that right?” he said speculatively, and then turned slightly to nod toward the windows overlooking the park and the lights of the city. “It seems you were enjoying the view,” JC commented politely.

Justin never took his eyes from JC’s face. “Yes. Yes I am,” he said firmly, and gulped a little as JC took the half-empty champagne glass from his fingers and took a long and deep sip. He licked his lips deliberately and Justin felt his heart stutter again.

“So, are you a fan of the opera, Justin?” JC’s voice was low and almost lazy, and his eyes, when he turned from the window to look at him, were knowing.

“Not at all,” Justin answered forthrightly. “I’m tagging along with my friend Lance. He works for the firm, I’m visiting him from out of town.” He watched as JC took another sip from Justin’s glass and felt his throat go dry. “What about you?”

“Not a big opera fan either,” JC said dismissively. He looked amused. “But the pre-opera parties can sometimes be . . . rewarding.”

Justin grinned, and shifted his feet so he moved a little closer. “Well, the hors d’oeuvres are excellent,” he said, and was rewarded with a smile.

“You should try some more of the champagne,” JC said. “It’s quite good.”

“I plan on it,” Justin said, and tried not to stare at JC’s throat as he deliberately downed the rest of the contents of Justin’s glass and licked his lips. “So, what about you? Do you work with Lance?”

“No, I’m afraid I do not know your friend Lance,” JC said smoothly. “Perhaps you’d like to introduce me?”

“Maybe later,” Justin murmured. He allowed his eyes to travel lingeringly down JC’s figure, elegant in a perfectly fitted black formal suit with a crisp blue shirt and a silk tie that would’ve cost two weeks’ salary at Justin’s new job. Nice, he thought. His eyes skated back up to JC’s face. Really nice. Then he saw the slightly raised eyebrow, the amused blue eyes, and fought back a blush.

“Yes, perhaps later,” JC said, and now he was definitely laughing at Justin. “So,” JC started, and Justin struggled to concentrate. Converse, damnit, he told himself, and applied his attention to JC’s words. “Are you enjoying yourself here?” He indicated the huge common room with a gesture, and Justin turned from the window to look.

“It’s, ahhh. Well,” he started, and snagged two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, handing one to JC. “It’s a very nice party. This place is certainly, uh, big,” he said diplomatically, and JC raised a perfect eyebrow. “And white,” Justin added recklessly. “And really, really empty and cold. Like nobody lives here, or like whoever does live here has no personality whatsoever.”

Both of JC's eyebrows went up this time, and Justin cursed himself. Why did this man rattle him so much? He'd met gorgeous men before, he'd met gorgeous rich men before, he'd just spent five years in and around Harvard for Christ's sake. Get a grip.

"Really?" JC asked, his eyes leaving Justin and narrowing as they traveled around the crowded room. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, there's no comfortable furniture," Justin pointed out. "Nothing on the walls that tells you anything about the people who live here, no pictures on the fireplace mantle, and," he gestured to the walls, "no books." He shook his head sadly. "How can there be no books? It just seems . . ." He broke off and shrugged. "I guess it's just different from where I grew up," he finished and at last he'd said something right; JC had turned his attention back to him and this time Justin was prepared for the effect those blue-green eyes had on his central nervous system.

"And where was that?" JC asked, and he seemed truly interested. Justin shifted a little closer and JC didn't move away; Justin caught JC's eyes flicking down his body, looking him over much as Justin had examined him just a few minutes ago. Justin smiled and let him look, trying to suppress the pounding of his heart.

"Tennessee," he finally answered, exaggerating his drawl just the slightest bit. "I've been in Cambridge these last few years, though," he added, and JC glanced slyly at him.

"Ah," he said smoothly. "A Harvard boy, am I right?"

Justin grinned at him. "You're right about the Harvard part," he said, and paused to take a healthy sip of his champagne. "But I'm not a boy. Really, not a boy, JC."

JC's smile grew and warmed; he lifted his chin and cocked his head a little, his eyes bright and hungry on Justin's face. "No, I can see that," he murmured agreeably, and Justin felt himself flush.

He was gathering his courage for a more direct sally when JC's attention was caught by something over Justin's shoulder. Justin blinked at the rapid change in facial expression, from smiling and, thank god, appreciative, to cold and shuttered. Just like that. Justin started to turn around to see what had dragged JC's attention away from him, but was stopped by JC's hand, stretched out as if to shake his.

"It's been a real pleasure talking with you, Justin," he said, and his voice was still low and intimate, sending a frisson of awareness down Justin's spine. "But if you'll excuse me, I really should see to the rest of my guests." He smiled brilliantly as Justin froze in horror, squeezed his hand meaningfully, and walked away.

The noise of the party swirled around him and Justin fought to get his breath back. He couldn't believe he'd just . . . He'd said . . . Why hadn't he thought . . . Oh god, Justin thought miserably. Oh god, the sexiest man he'd ever met, and in less than five minutes he'd managed to insult him. And the host of this party . . . Justin closed his eyes for a moment in utter humiliation. Lance was going to kill him.

“Justin,” and right on cue, there was Lance’s tense voice and sharp elbow, knocking into Justin’s arm. “Justin, please tell me you weren’t just trying to pick up JC Chasez.”

Justin took a big mouthful of the excellent champagne and opened his eyes, looking blindly out the huge window as he swallowed. “That,” he said wryly, “was exactly what I was trying to do.”

“Oh for the love of god, Justin,” Lance started, and Justin sighed. “I thought we had an agreement here. I thought . . .”

“Lance,” he said quietly, still staring at the window. “I had no idea who he was. He didn’t tell me his last name. Or anything, really,” he added. He took another gulp of his champagne, feeling it burn down his throat. “I insulted his taste. Or maybe his decorator’s taste,” he added morosely.

“Oh god,” Lance said quietly. “Justin, I can’t believe . . . JC Chasez is a VP at Antaeus Corp. Everyone knows who he is; he’s been on the cover of Business Week,” he added. “He’s the most ruthless businessman in New York, and his company is our client. And you tried to pick him up and then you insulted him? In his own house?” Lance sounded desperate. Justin sighed again.

“Hey, I offered to introduce him to you,” he offered weakly, and Lance practically snarled at him.

“I can’t believe you,” he hissed. “You, that’s, oh fuck. Justin.”

“Hey, it’s not that bad,” Justin said quietly, turning to face Lance. “I mean, yeah, I came on pretty strong, but he wasn’t exactly shooting me down.” He raised his head and started to scan the room, searching for the slender figure, the head full of dark hair. There, by the fireplace, speaking calmly with two other men in similar formal dress. As Justin’s eyes lit on him JC raised his head, and Justin felt the impact of those eyes from all the way across the room.

His heart stuttered again. “As a matter of fact,” Justin said slowly, staring hard, “As a matter of fact, he approached me first.” Their eyes locked across the room and as Justin watched JC tilted his head and gave him a very small, speculative smile.

Justin felt a rush of adrenaline and kept from gasping with an effort. Instead he smiled back and nodded, and felt a surge of sharp anticipation as JC’s eyes lingered on him before he turned back to finish his conversation. Justin watched as JC moved away from the two men, greeted another, and headed toward the far corner of the big room, possibly to speak to the musicians. Justin glanced at the clock; it was getting late, but perhaps all was not lost.

“You’re leaving,” Lance was informing him. “You’re leaving right now, you’re getting in a cab and going back to my apartment, or to wherever you want to go as long as it isn’t here. You are leaving before you ruin my entire career and life. No,” he added as Justin turned a big smile on him. “No, don’t even think about it, Justin. No way.”

“Lance,” Justin said distractedly, as if Lance hadn’t spoken at all. “Excuse me for a moment.”

“Where are you . . . No, Justin, wait . . .”

Justin didn’t even hear him as he moved away and started working his way slowly across the room. The string quartet had stopped playing and JC was speaking with one of the musicians, getting interrupted every few seconds by someone shaking his hand and, apparently, saying goodnight. There was a general but very slow exodus of people toward the wide hallway leading to the elevator. Justin grimaced. It was going to take a while to get two hundred people down to the lobby in one elevator.

A trio of perfectly dressed business men seemed intent on having JC ride to the Met with them in their limo, and Justin eased up beside JC just as he turned away from graciously declining the offer. He was smiling as he came face to face with Justin, and he casually held out his hand to shake, for all the world as if they’d known each other forever.

“How very nice of you to come tonight, Justin,” JC said smoothly, and Justin struggled to keep his composure as he felt that warm palm slide slowly against his again.

“Thank you for inviting me,” he replied with some composure, and for a moment they grinned at each other before JC released his hand. “Listen, I want to apologize for what I said earlier, about your place here . . .” Justin gestured vaguely at the room, and JC tilted his head slightly, his eyes bright on Justin’s face.

“I don’t know, Justin. The more I think about it, the more I feel as if I’ve been bitterly insulted.” His smile was brilliant, and his eyes intent, and Justin was caught by them like a deer in the headlights. “Really, I’m not sure that you’re capable of making it up to me.”

Justin held his eyes and smiled slowly. He dropped his voice so JC had to lean closer to hear. “Actually, I think I am. Capable, I mean.” He paused, and added, “And I’m sure this place isn’t nearly as impersonal when it’s not wall-to-wall people.” He held his breath and waited for JC’s response.

JC’s facial expression did not change but his smile suddenly seemed sharper, his eyes bluer. “Well, why don’t you stick around, and find out,” he said lightly, and with a final electric look he turned away to speak with another group of people.

Heart pounding, Justin stepped aside and moved away as JC began speaking to a woman in a beautiful burgundy silk gown with a king’s ransom of jewels around her throat. JC held her hand as she spoke, and she was gesticulating with her free hand and tilting her head and exhibiting all sorts of flirtatious behavior. Justin heard JC say something about how he was just back from Milan and needed to give the New York office some attention, but of course, he’d definitely call her in a couple of weeks. This was accompanied by a smile so breathtaking that Justin’s throat went dry and it apparently had a similar effect on the woman, who simply nodded and smiled as JC pressed a kiss to her cheek and turned to smile at an older gentleman who tapped him on the shoulder.

Justin hung back by the fireplace, making himself inconspicuous as the party attendees moved slowly from the room and to the elevator. He saw Lance moving purposefully toward him and cut him off with a smile.

“Hey,” he said quietly as Lance drew near. “Thank you so much for bringing me with you tonight. I think I’ll just hang out here for a while.” He took another glass of champagne from a passing waiter and sipped at it to hide his grin. “You should feel free to go on to the opera without me.”

Lance stared at him as if he’d sprouted another head.

“Yes,” Justin added. “I’m absolutely serious.”

“Justin,” Lance murmured seriously. “I think maybe you weren’t listening to me earlier. This guy isn’t like someone you’d pick up in a bar, you know? He’s powerful, really, really powerful. And ruthless. And well-known.”

“And hot.”

“Well, yeah. But Justin, that’s really, really not the point.”

Justin regarded him steadily. “Is he wanted for murder or anything nasty like that?”

“No. I mean, not that I know of.”

“Then I don’t care, Lance.” Justin drained his champagne glass, his eyes on JC as he bid farewell to another large group of glittering people. His stomach was fluttering in the best possible way, and he couldn’t wipe the smile off his face as he turned back to Lance. “Seriously, man. I’m single, I’m of age, I have cab fare, and I can take care of myself. Just, you know, go to the opera. And I’ll see you later.”

Lance frowned sternly at him for a moment, than sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “You’re right, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to act like your mother.” He straightened up and glanced around. “Okay then, I’m going to take off.” He raised an eyebrow and quirked a sly grin at Justin. “Have fun.”

“You know it,” Justin murmured, and grinned at him as he moved away. The room was thinning out, and Justin set his glass down and followed a short hallway until he found a large bathroom.

He washed his hands, rinsed out his mouth and anxiously inspected his reflection in the large mirror. Had the knot in his tie been this crooked when he was talking to JC? He frowned at his neat black suit. It was fine, but it was off the rack and nowhere near the quality of JC’s, or most of the people’s he’d seen here tonight. He brushed at his sleeves and rubbed his hand over his jaw and checked his hair, grateful that he’d just had it trimmed. He looked fine. He looked better than fine, he thought, raising his chin and examining his reflection. He looked hot. He thought of the look JC had given him from across the room and took a long and deep breath, anticipation tingling pleasantly in his stomach.

He waited a decent length of time before returning to the living room. When he emerged from the hallway he blinked in astonishment. JC’s staff was really something -- the room had been cleaned and straightened and transformed back into a reasonable sort of living space, complete with furniture, subdued lighting, and JC, seated on a black leather couch with his

suit jacket gone and his tie loosened. His blue eyes examined Justin intently from over the rim of his champagne glass. Justin's heart stuttered in his chest and pounded in his ears, and he walked toward JC on legs that didn't quite feel steady.

As he drew closer JC set his glass down on a table and rose to his feet to face him. "So," he said quietly. "What do you think now?"

Justin cast a cursory look around the almost-empty room and smiled. "It's a great room for a big party," he said diplomatically, and felt his pulse accelerate when JC grinned at him.

"Yes, it is that," he said agreeably. "Maybe you'd like to see some more of the place?"

"I would," Justin answered, and eased himself closer so that he was just at the edge of JC's personal space. JC's eyes grew dark and his smile faded. He took a single, purposeful step that brought his mouth within inches of Justin's, and Justin focused on his full, soft-looking lips.

"Well then. Come with me," JC murmured, and when he turned away Justin followed in a daze.

He led him down another hallway and up a half flight of stairs, into a huge bedroom that must have been right above the main room they'd been in. Justin had a confused impression of long windows, wood floors, indirect lighting, thick floor rugs in warm colors and a large bed against the opposite wall, but all he could really focus on was the small smile on JC's lips and the flush across his cheekbones when he turned to face him.

Justin wanted to say something, something devastating and cool, something to make JC look at him with the sort of desperation Justin was starting to feel. But his heart was pounding so hard, thudding in his ears and beating in his chest and making his hands shake. He couldn't seem to draw enough oxygen. JC's eyes examined his face closely, and his smile faded. Without a word he leaned in and brought his mouth firmly to Justin's.

The room seemed to spin and Justin choked back a moan as JC's lips smoothed persuasively against his own, warm and soft as they coaxed him to open. His hands reached blindly forward and found JC's waist, and the warmth of his skin through the fine cotton shirt made him gasp. He wanted his hands on that smooth and heated skin; he wanted to grip JC's head in his hands and explore every inch of his slick mouth; he wanted to scrape his fingertips through JC's thick dark hair; he wanted to tear his clothes off and drag him to the floor right where they stood.

"Easy," JC murmured against his lips, and Justin realized that his fingers had tightened desperately on JC's waist, digging hard into his skin and twisting the cloth. He loosened them and pressed his palms against the warmth, sliding them up to JC's ribs. JC made an encouraging noise in the back of his throat and eased a little closer, standing toe to toe with Justin as their tongues tangled slowly, drawing another low moan from Justin. JC's fingers were traveling up and down the front of Justin's shirt, lingering at each button but making no move to undo them as his mouth continued to wreak havoc on Justin's senses. He didn't even notice that JC had peeled his jacket from his shoulders until he heard it hit the floor and he

opened his eyes, dazed. Then JC's mouth moved across his jaw and to the soft skin under his left ear, and Justin closed his eyes again, lost.

He didn't realize that his tie had gone the way of his jacket and his shirt was unbuttoned until he felt fingertips skating over his chest, pulling the shirt open as they traced a slow pattern on his skin. Justin's head tilted back and he sucked air desperately as JC's mouth opened warmly against his throat. His own hands had not moved; they were still pressed against JC's waist. He couldn't believe he'd just been standing here, letting JC drive him crazy. Justin shuddered into action.

His fingers shook as he brought them to JC's throat, stroking the warm skin before fumbling with the knot of his tie. It was already loosened and Justin pulled it off with a great deal less finesse than JC had done his, shaking it loose from JC's collar and tossing it to the floor. He paused and gulped convulsively, shivering at the feel of JC's tongue on the thin skin over his collar bone. Then JC was easing Justin's shirt off of his shoulders, smiling and murmuring appreciatively as his hands smoothed over the warm skin of his upper arms and crept around to his back, pulling him against his body.

The feel of JC's fine cotton shirt against the over-sensitized skin of his chest made Justin close his eyes and groan softly. His fingers lost all coordination as they fumbled with the buttons on JC's shirt, and froze completely when JC's hands moved low on his waist and pulled his hips closer, closer, tight against him until their bodies nestled together in all the right ways. "There, now," JC whispered in Justin's ear, his breath warm and making him shiver as he moved one leg between Justin's and eased him closer, his hands firm on Justin's hips. "Better?"

Justin nodded frantically and squirmed against the delicious friction, his mouth open as he panted for air. JC's hands were burning the skin at his waist as they slid around and started to slowly work at his belt buckle. Justin leaned forward, his mouth searching blindly for JC's as his hands scrabbled at his shirt, trying to pull it out of his pants. His arousal was painful and almost overwhelming. He twisted slowly against JC's thigh and nearly groaned with pleasure when JC lifted his head and kissed him again.

The slow slide of JC's tongue was driving Justin to distraction and he struggled to keep focused. He needed to get JC's clothes off, he needed to get his hands on his skin, he needed to get them both horizontal. He let his tongue be coaxed into JC's warm, slick mouth, sliding dizzily against JC's tongue as he focused on unbuttoning his shirt. He didn't quite succeed -- at least one button popped off beneath Justin's impatient fingers -- but JC didn't seem to mind, grinning against Justin's mouth and chuckling low in his throat in a way that made Justin want to rip the rest of his clothes off, right now.

"Shoes off," JC murmured, bringing his mouth back to Justin's, moving hypnotically against his lips. "Now."

Justin managed to blindly toe his black dress shoes off without breaking contact with JC's mouth or body. He'd finally gotten JC's shirt open and was mesmerized by the silky warmth of his skin; his lean waist and stomach, ridged with muscle; the hints of hair arrowing down toward the waistband of his pants. JC's hands were busy at the front of Justin's pants and Justin pulled his lips away from JC's gorgeous mouth as he felt his zipper being pulled

slowly down. He panted helplessly, dropping his forehead to JC's shoulder as JC stroked him slowly through his thin underwear, circling the rough cloth gently over the head. Justin trembled so hard his teeth chattered, and JC crooned sympathetically.

"That bad, huh?" he whispered, and Justin lifted his head and opened his eyes in time to see JC lick his lips and smile. The sight almost made him whimper. JC pushed Justin backwards with one finger on the middle of his chest, and even as his body screamed protests at the loss of contact, Justin obediently shuffled one small step and sat down abruptly on the bed.

JC was still dressed in his shoes and pants, with his dress shirt on but hanging open. Justin reached his hands out but JC ignored them, efficiently stripping Justin's underpants and slacks from his body, leaving him naked and spread out on his bed.

Justin felt feverish, his body aching and his skin tingling and sensitized. He felt like he couldn't get enough air and he couldn't keep himself from squirming restlessly on JC's thick comforter. He started to sit up, reaching out to touch JC and to pull him down on the bed with him, but once again JC neatly avoided his hands. He leaned down and placed a finger at the base of Justin's throat, drawing it slowly down the center of his chest to his abdomen, watching Justin's face intently as he closed his eyes and groaned, thrashing helplessly.

"Okay," JC murmured, and without warning he leaned down and wrapped his mouth around Justin's aching cock.

The pleasure of it slammed through Justin's body; his heels dug into the mattress and his spine twisted, arching right off the bed. JC's hands scorched the skin on his naked hips, his tongue swirling firmly around the sensitive head of Justin's cock, and Justin grit his teeth and panted. He shuddered like he'd been on the ragged edge of an orgasm for hours instead of making out for just twenty minutes. He clenched his eyes shut and struggled to hold on as JC licked and sucked firmly. He didn't dare look, or it would be over.

And JC didn't seem interested in prolonging it, because he eased his hands between Justin's thighs and under his naked buttocks, squeezing rhythmically at the sensitive flesh and urging him to squirm, thrust. Justin dug his fingers into the comforter, feeling his neck arch and his mouth open, hearing the helpless sounds coming from deep in his throat. His knees were wide open to JC, he was spread out in front of him like a sacrifice and none of this was going the way Justin thought it would, but the ferocious pleasure was building inside of him so quickly he couldn't breathe, and with a final thrust he threw an arm across his face and came so hard he almost blacked out.

When he came back to himself he was sprawled ignominiously on JC's bed, and JC was standing beside the bed, still dressed. His shirt had been untucked from his slacks and was open in front, showing his lean chest and muscled stomach, and he was smiling at Justin, a glittering and hungry smile that made Justin's heart stutter in his chest despite his satiation. JC lifted his hands and calmly began unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt as Justin struggled blearily to a sitting position.

"I hope that took the edge off," he commented quietly, his smile knowing and sly.

“God,” Justin murmured as his head cleared. “Oh, god, um. JC, come here,” he said, reaching out to JC as he stripped out of his shirt. Justin’s mouth went dry as his hands went to the fastening of his slacks. “Come here, let me do that,” he said, his eyes avid as more skin was revealed.

“No, you’re too slow,” JC said with a wicked grin, sliding his slacks down his legs and allowing Justin to rub a hand down the long curve of his back as he bent. He stood up and Justin gulped convulsively. JC’s body was beautiful in the dim lighting, smooth and lean. Justin stroked an appreciative hand over JC’s bicep, then got to his knees and wrapped his arms around him, his hands smoothing greedily over his long back and firm ass, luxuriating in the warmth of his body, pulling him close and tilting his head up to kiss him deeply.

JC’s erection nudged firmly against Justin’s thigh. His mouth was warm and tasted faintly bitter, from himself, Justin realized. The thought made him gasp and he felt his cock twitch. JC ran his hands over Justin’s jaw and into his short hair, fingernails scraping gently against his scalp and making him shiver with pleasure. Justin pulled JC forward until he was kneeling on the bed in front of him, and then started to kiss his way down his chest. His hands smoothed down JC’s abdomen and closed gently around his cock just as his tongue found JC’s left nipple.

JC hissed in appreciation, his hands stroking over Justin’s head and over his shoulders, but when Justin would’ve moved lower he pulled his head up, leaning in to kiss him again.

“I have a better idea,” he whispered. His lips were full and swollen, his eyes dark, and Justin gulped as he wordlessly nodded. JC smiled at him slowly and kissed him again, kissed him until his mind swirled with heat and his cock was hard again. When JC’s mouth lifted Justin found himself once again on his back and panting for breath, and JC was kneeling between his legs, his fingers glistening as he set the tube of lube aside. Justin gripped the pillow beneath his head, raised his knees and took a deep, shuddering breath.

JC seemed to be in no hurry, despite an erection that had to be painful. He was slow and very careful, leaning down to kiss Justin’s stomach and stroking his thigh soothingly, whispering to him as he writhed.

“Justin,” he whispered. “You really are so lovely,” and he leaned down to mouth Justin’s cock, swollen and sensitive and aching again, while his fingers turned and twisted inside. Justin exhaled noisily, almost a cry as his hands found JC’s head and dug through his hair, trying to make him move higher, suck harder, something. He couldn’t quite breathe, he was sheened with sweat and panting like he’d sprinted a mile. His body was screaming for release, and JC’s free hand was firm on his stomach, keeping Justin from thrashing as he lazily licked up his cock and across his stomach.

“Oh fuck,” he breathed, his voice hoarse and croaking. “God, JC, please. Now.”

JC’s tongue flicked over a nipple as his fingers did something that made Justin shudder. He felt sweat break out on his brow. “I’m not ready yet,” JC said quietly, teasingly, and there were his teeth, biting gently on Justin’s collar bone as he squirmed.

“You are,” Justin said desperately, “you are, I know you are, please JC, please . . .” he trailed off with a gasp as JC’s mouth opened warmly on the side of his neck, tonguing at Justin’s racing pulse. Justin’s hands stroked urgently over his shoulders, encouraging, imploring. “Oh god. Please. Now.”

JC leaned back and Justin closed his eyes and hissed as the fingers were slowly, gently withdrawn. He kept them closed and listened to his body hum urgently. He heard the foil rip and wanted to watch, or sit up and help, but he was already too far gone.

A moment later the mattress shifted and Justin whimpered as he felt JC probe gently at his opening, and there it was, firm and thick and cool from the lube, and Justin lifted his knees further and tried to breathe.

JC’s voice was low and sweet as he leaned over him. “Justin,” he said softly. “Justin, I want you to open your eyes.” Justin squirmed desperately against JC’s body, against the cock gently teasing him, trying to get closer. “C’mon, Justin,” JC whispered. “I want you to look at me.”

Justin pulled his eyes open with an effort. JC’s face was close, hard-edged and unsmiling as he poised over Justin’s body. There was sweat on his upper lip and a thin bead sliding down the side of his face. His mouth was tight with restraint, and the sight made Justin shudder into action. He slid his hands up JC’s braced and trembling arms and over his smooth shoulders, drawing him closer. They stared into each other’s eyes as JC slowly, slowly slid inside.

Justin’s feet flexed desperately as JC paused, pulled almost all the way out just as slowly, and then moved back in with more force. Three more slow thrusts and then another agonizing pause as he leaned forward, his lips meeting Justin’s. Justin squirmed encouragingly, his own cock trapped between their bellies and his hands frantic on JC’s ass, his back, urging him to move, move move. JC smiled against his lips.

“Easy, now,” he whispered and Justin shook his head, no, no. But JC’s voice was trembling a little and when Justin circled his hips encouragingly JC sucked in a breath and sank his teeth into his lower lip, and Justin stared raptly into his face as he finally, finally started to thrust in earnest.

The comforter beneath them was thick and soft, enveloping Justin gently as the heated body above him drove him deeper and deeper. He couldn’t keep his hands still, running his fingertips greedily over JC’s damp chest and waist and widening his own legs and arching his back a little to catch the delicious friction on his cock as JC’s thrusts drove him slowly out of his mind. He groaned desperately as JC found the perfect angle and gave a wicked twist of his hips once, twice, again and again, and Justin clenched his teeth against the scream as he came.

Justin was still gasping for air when JC slowed, his hips still moving fluidly for a breathless few seconds as he bit his lip and grappled for control. Justin rubbed his back and dug his fingers into JC’s smooth ass, coaxing, demanding, and JC shuddered hard. Then he dropped his head and sank firmly into Justin’s body, moving urgently until he groaned, trembled, and came.

Justin was still shaking from his own climax when JC pulled slowly out. He was dimly aware of him moving away, and returning with a warm cloth that he pulled gently across Justin's stomach and chest, dabbing carefully at his exhausted cock. His eyes were already closing when he felt the mattress dip and JC's lips touch his mouth, and then everything went dark.

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Justin woke slowly, his body stiff and exhausted and his brain numb. There were soft lips and a slick tongue sliding up and down the curve of his neck, and if he wasn't so exhausted he would smile. But this was the third, or possibly the fourth time he'd been woken up this night, in this bed, and his cock was already firmly informing him that it had nothing left to give.

"Justin," a voice whispered in his ear, the soft breath making him shiver. Just like the last time he'd woken from a light doze to find JC's mouth on his throat and his hand on Justin's already-awake cock, and he'd rolled him over so he was facing him and guided their bodies together and it had been so good, so good it had almost hurt Justin when he'd come for the fourth, or was it the fifth, time that night . . .

"C'mon, Justin." JC's voice was so sexy, low and dark and amused, and it did something amazing to his central nervous system because just the sound of it made Justin's body react in ways he'd thought impossible just moments before. He took a deep breath and prepared to stretch, testing out his soreness factor. He rolled over to his back and opened his eyes, ready to smile.

The room was glowing with the pre-sunrise light, suffusing it with warmth. JC was naked, the sheets covering him to the waist, one hand propping up his head. His eyes were knowing and intimate, his smile lazy.

"It's time for you to go," he said softly, and Justin froze before he could smile in return.

JC gazed steadily at him as his words echoed in this ears.

"Go?" Justin blinked at him in disbelief. JC wanted him to leave?

Apparently so: JC nodded.

It took a moment for this to sink in, and when it did Justin closed his mouth with an audible snap. He turned away and sat up, hoping to hide his flush of humiliation. He could practically feel JC's eyes on his back, and Justin climbed as swiftly from the bed as his stiff body would allow.

His clothes were still in a heap on the floor and Justin dressed as quickly as he could, keeping his back turned as he pulled on the clothes from the night before. The silence thudded in his ears and his breath was short. His face felt like it was on fire. He shoved his feet ruthlessly into his still-tied shoes and stuffed his tie into his jacket pocket, leaving his shirt unbuttoned at the throat. Gathering his courage, he glanced at the bed.

JC still reclined against the headboard, his mouth still curved in a small, sated smile. “It was really nice to meet you, Justin,” he said quietly.

“Same here,” Justin said, relieved that his voice came out normally despite his dry throat. “I’ll, uh, just have the doorman get me a cab,” he added, and bolted for the door without looking back.

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Ah, the joys of the morning-after walk of shame, Justin thought as he exited the elevator in his rumpled evening clothes and saw the attendant’s impassive face and carefully averted eyes. The gleaming mirrors inside the elevator had told him everything he needed to know: he had red, blurry eyes, a swollen mouth, a sheet-crease on the left side of his face and a lurid hickey at the base of his throat. He lifted his chin and strode directly for the main lobby doors, murmuring in assent when the doorman offered to hail him a cab. Less than a minute later he was safely inside the taxi and giving Lance’s address to the driver, and as the cab pulled away Justin leaned back against the seat with a deep sigh, his body relaxing into bonelessness. He felt numb -- he couldn’t believe he’d woken up less than ten minutes ago feeling so incredibly good. He closed his eyes and thought about nothing at all.

Twenty minutes later the sun had come up and Justin was quietly letting himself in to Lance’s apartment. He pulled the key gingerly from the lock as the door opened, not wanting to disturb Lance or his roommates, but as luck would have it Lance was sitting at the kitchen counter, eating cereal and reading the newspaper. He stopped in mid-crunch when he saw Justin come through the door, and his eyebrows shot all the way up to his hairline.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, spitting cereal crumbs all over the table. Justin rubbed a hand over his face and laughed a little.

“No, not this time,” he said, his voice sounding raspy even to himself. “It’s only me.”

Lance stared at him, his forehead wrinkling a little. “Should I ask how you’re feeling?” he ventured cautiously. He looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or be concerned.

Justin closed the door behind him and tossed his raincoat onto a hook by the door. “I don’t really know,” he admitted, and Lance set his spoon down slowly, his eyes intent. Justin eased himself gingerly into the chair opposite and pulled the open box of cereal toward him, reaching in for a dry handful. The scene felt so comforting and familiar -- he was reminded of college, talking over the previous night’s parties on early mornings during the three years he and Lance had shared a dorm and then an apartment.

“Well,” Justin started slowly. “I met this really great guy, smart and very, very hot, and I had a marathon night of the best sex of my entire life. And then,” he continued wryly, “I got kicked out before the sun came up, sort of like I was a hooker.” He crunched his cereal thoughtfully. “Maybe even a sub-par hooker,” he added, and paused to grab another handful of Captain Crunch. “So, I guess I’d say that I was feeling great until, oh, half an hour ago. Now,” he summed up, rooting in the cereal box and not meeting Lance’s eyes, “now I pretty much feel like shit.” He raised his eyes to Lance’s and smiled humorlessly around a mouthful of cereal. “And how are you today?”

Lance smiled sympathetically and shook his head. “I told you not to get mixed up with that guy, Justin. He’s not like people in college or back home in Tennessee. He’s a rich, ruthless, scary business man, and he’s well-known and important and . . . Well, I’m not surprised he treated you like shit.” He resumed eating, his eyes sympathetic. “I’m sorry he treated you like shit,” he added. “But I’m not surprised.” He frowned as Justin dug into the cereal box again, and pushed the milk carton across the table. “And get a bowl, would you? Jesus.”

Justin rolled his eyes before rising slowly and moving to the kitchen for a bowl and a spoon. His body ached languidly in half a dozen good and bad ways. He would enjoy each of them if he weren't feeling so fucking humiliated, he thought, and felt a dull sort of resentment against JC. What a buzz kill.

He didn’t want to think about JC anymore. In fact, he thought determinedly, he didn’t want to think about him at all, ever again. Starting right this minute.

“So, how was the opera?” he asked Lance as he walked back to the table, bowl in hand.

“It was pretty good,” Lance said, and his green eyes glinted with mischief. “During intermission I heard JC Chasez’s grandfather telling someone that JC couldn’t make the performance because he had a, and I quote, ‘very important business conference.’” Lance grinned as Justin choked on his milk. “Yeah, I was amused.”

“A business conference,” Justin murmured, and shook his head. “Well thank god he didn’t notice the person who was, uh, actually hanging around waiting for everyone to leave,” he said.

“Not that it really matters to you,” Lance pointed out. “You’re leaving next week anyway.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be back in a couple of months,” Justin said thoughtfully, and Lance folded his newspaper and set it firmly aside.

“Even then, it’s not like you and the Chasez family will be running in the same circles,” he said sternly. “Unless he’s on the cover of some magazine, you’ll probably never see him again.”

“Yeah, and thank god,” Justin muttered, and sighed.

Lance’s sharp eyes watched him closely as he spooned up his cereal. “Best sex of your whole life?” he asked, and smiled as Justin nodded morosely. “Too bad he’s such an asshole.”

Justin shrugged. For a moment he remembered JC’s slow smile and husky, teasing voice, his gentle fingers and warm mouth and the way his body had curved and flexed . . . Justin’s jaw tightened as he thrust the memory aside. “It sure is,” he replied casually, and bent to his cereal.

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JC sat motionless and waited for his grandfather to arrive at the club for lunch, a martini in front of him and a handsome waiter at his side anxiously watching his water glass, eager to

fill it at any moment should JC pick it up and drain it all at once. It was nearly noon, but the lazy, sated heaviness he felt from the previous night continued to linger. JC closed his eyes, his mouth curving into a small, satisfied smile as he remembered the taste of Justin's skin, the small of his back, the soft, breathy sounds he'd made just before he came.

As was his usual practice, JC had kicked him out at the break of dawn -- it was both messy and unpleasant to make a one-night stand any longer than one night -- but he really had been exquisite, and for just a moment, JC wished that he'd talked to him a little more, maybe gotten his phone number, seen if they could hook up again. It was a shame that he hadn't, but such was life, and JC had far too many other things to worry about to waste much time on regret.

The club was always busy during lunch, but this never mattered to the Chasez family, who tended to eat their meals in private dining rooms instead of among the throng. For years now JC had been meeting his grandfather here once a month to discuss work, family, and anything else that came to mind. Most times they ended up talking about work: JC's grandfather was the single person JC knew who was more dedicated to Antaeus than he was, and his grandfather loved to bounce ideas off of JC even though he didn't always take his advice. That was actually fine, because one day, JC knew, he would be in his grandfather's position -- one day, he would make all of the decisions -- and when that time came, he could do whatever he wanted with the company. Until that day, however, JC was content to follow his grandfather's lead. He was old and crotchety, but he was deadly smart. JC had learned nearly everything he knew about business from him.

Finally, the old man appeared, and JC frowned as he watched him limping slightly. His knees were probably bothering him again -- his grandfather had been an enthusiastic athlete in his own day, and his doctor had told him just last month that he was going to need knee replacement surgery in the next year or so. JC fought the urge to protectively slide his hands over his own kneecaps, then stood up to greet his grandfather, who hugged him, pounded him on the back, and took a seat.

The new arrival prompted a flurry of action from the silent waiter: a scotch and a bottle of wine were brought to the table, it was quickly confirmed that the two men would eat exactly what they always did, and another glass of water to be watched over was provided. Once he and his grandfather were alone, JC looked carefully across the table, trying to ascertain his grandfather's mood. All signs veered toward grumpiness, which was absolutely normal and indicated that everything was just fine. JC took a deep breath and prepared to listen.

"Feelings," JC's grandfather began in an aggravated, crabby voice, and JC was very, very careful not to smile. "I'll tell you, young man -- I never had a feeling in my life. When I grew up nobody cared how you felt about something -- they just wanted you to put your head down, shut up, and get your work done. And we did! That's exactly what we did."

"I know," JC said, and it was true. His grandfather had worked every day of his life since he was in his teens.

"Yes you do." His grandfather leaned forward and beamed at him with still-brilliant blue eyes. "You're a good boy -- you work hard, and you've done a wonderful job. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Grandpa," JC said. "I --"

"Now, your brother -- that's another issue altogether," his grandfather interrupted, and JC sighed inwardly. His grandfather had some definite opinions about Tyler.

"When you were his age, you were top of the class, big man on campus, all of it. You took your business courses, you got your M.B.A., and you went to Europe to work -- you planned it out and you executed it just like a man. And now Tyler -- all I hear from him is 'I don't like that major! It doesn't feel right to me!'" His grandfather waved his big hands in the air in a gesture of bewilderment and annoyance. "What the hell, Joshua?"

JC spoke carefully. "He'll figure something out. Not everyone is as -- focused as I was, but that could actually be a good thing. You know how smart Tyler is, and you know he'll do well in the end, no matter what he chooses to study."

"Hmph," his grandfather crankily said, then settled back into his chair and relaxed a bit. "That was a nice party you gave last night."

JC took a sip of wine, put down his glass, and nodded. "Yes. I'm glad you thought so."

"I don't really go in for all that fancy food, or for the ridiculous decorating scheme you've got going in your public rooms. It's like walking through a metal box, very cold and sterile."

Good lord -- was everyone a critic? "Grandpa, those are -- I paid a designer thousands of dollars to make it look that way, and I like it. I mean, in terms of design alone, it --"

"Yes, yes, I'm quite sure it's all very fabulous," his grandfather brusquely said. "Well, no matter how horrible the decorating, you at least had a few very pretty young ladies there."

"Yes. Definitely." JC knew exactly what was coming next.

"Yes, lots of pretty young ladies," his grandfather repeated dreamily, and then looked conspiratorially at JC. "I was going to ask you why I didn't see you at the theater afterward, but I'm pretty sure I've just answered my own question."

JC thought again of Justin on his back, the long, gradual curve of his torso in the dim light, his head turning restlessly back and forth on the pillow as JC had fucked him, had gone in deep and slow and in exactly the right way, over and over again. He thought of the particular pitch Justin's voice had taken right before he'd given way completely, the lovely, desperate, hungry tenor of it, and --

"If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were blushing," his grandfather teased, and JC really did blush then, ducking his head and fighting desperately for control. Why was he acting like such a fool over a single one-night stand? He really needed to get it together.

"It's all right," his grandfather said magnanimously. "You're young, you're handsome, you're unattached -- these things happen. It's perfectly normal. I just hope you realize that this isn't something you can be doing for the rest of your life."

"Oh, no. I --"

"Because at one time or another, Joshua, you've got to settle down, devote yourself to family and career just like I did."

JC smiled faintly and kept his mouth shut as he remembered the wistful looks that had passed over his grandmother's face as she told him that his grandfather would yet again miss dinner, or the movie they'd been planning to see, or a trip to the cabin, or JC's birthday party. She'd always been so careful to say that he loved them all very much, to let JC know that while grandpa wanted to spend time with them, he simply couldn't get away. But eventually he'd learned to forgive his grandfather for his many absences. The company demanded his time in ways that family didn't, and that was just how things were.

"But why am I lecturing you? I know you'll come through for me in the end." His grandfather smiled warmly at him. "You always do."

They paused then as the waiter sat down a steak in front of JC's grandfather -- very rare, just the way he liked it -- and grilled salmon for JC. For a few moments they ate silently; then, his grandfather lifted his head, pointed his fork at JC, and said, "The figures from Europe -- you did quite well."

"It was lucrative, yes," JC acknowledged, because he had done well; he'd worked efficiently and tirelessly and it had paid off: new sources of capital, plans for further acquisitions, a series of deals that JC knew no one else could have pulled off. He could definitely feel pleased with himself on this count.

"You've got the Chasez touch all right," his grandfather said proudly, and then shook his head and grimaced. "I just wish that I had ten of you. New York has been hell as of late."

JC gave his grandfather a long, steady look. He knew for a fact that all their major holdings in America were doing just fine, and so there was only one thing the old man could be talking about, namely--

" -- Phoenix Press," his grandfather was saying. "God knows I love that publishing house, but I'm not sure how much longer I want to keep taking hits with it."

"Grandpa, it's publishing, and it's not a big commercial house. We've known forever that we're not going to turn much of a profit on it." JC spoke quickly as thoughts of his grandmother and how much she'd loved the press filled his mind. "We knew that from the start, and we decided --"

"I know, I know." His grandfather picked up his knife again and began to slice impatiently at his steak. "But every year their deficit grows, and I'm starting to get sick of it."

"But again, that press was never intended to be a big money-maker. Remember what Grandma always said? There's a mission to that kind of publishing, a higher purpose."

"Yes, well, they're high all right. They're two million dollars high -- two million dollars alone last year. And each year it gets worse."

JC frowned, because that really was a lot. "Well, it's a depressed business. Too many books are published each year and not enough people buy them. But just because the press is in trouble right now --"

"No one reads anymore! What people do these days is play around on the damn Internet! They waste all the time in the world talking into cell phones and writing e-mails!"

"I know, I know," JC said and then, not at all wanting to hear that particular rant again, quickly added, "But what about Phoenix? What are you planning to do with it?"

"I have an offer from Bertelsmann." His grandfather took a long drink of wine and grunted in approval. "They collect presses like salt shakers."

JC sat back and thought of his grandmother and tried to conceal the horror he felt at the idea of a giant conglomerate owning the family-based business she had devoted so much of her time to. Takeovers and acquisitions felt very different when you were on the wrong end of them.

"Look, I'm sure it doesn't have to come to that," he said as smoothly and as persuasively as he could. "They just need someone to come in and set them straight. I mean, all they think about is books -- I'm sure they don't understand business the way we do."

"Well they should. I'm sick and tired of it, sick of their stupid excuses and their shoddy performance year in and year out. No, I'm quite sure of it -- the thing to do is sell."

"But Grandma --" JC frowned as he watched his grandfather flinch, then went on anyway. "Grandma loved the press so much, remember? You weren't the only one who cared about work."

"Well, no, but her primary responsibility was always toward the family. Publishing was just something she dabbled in."

"You know that's not true -- you know how important it was to her," JC said evenly, ignoring his grandfather's increasingly uncomfortable gestures. "And so I think we should try to save it."

"I'm a businessman, Joshua. I'm not about to let my feelings get in the way of business decisions that need to be made, and neither should you. Absolutely not."

For a long, horrible moment, they locked eyes until JC quietly said, "Two years. Give me two years with it -- let me go in there and restructure and I -- I'll lower that deficit by half in two years, Grandpa. If I can do that, would you reconsider?"

"Two years? I'm not about to waste you on a useless charity mission for that long." The old man was growing truly irritable now.

"Okay, how about this," JC proposed, thinking evenly and clearly, trying as always to figure out how to pitch the deal, how to bring home exactly what he wanted. "I work one year intensively, set them up, help them reorganize. During that time I continue with my

responsibilities to the Antaeus board of directors -- and once it's over, I step back even further, become a consultant to them. And if they're not turned around by then, then we really should sell, because if I can't fix it --"

JC trailed off, held his breath, and waited for his grandfather to smile, relaxing imperceptibly when it finally came.

"If you can't fix it, my boy, nobody can," his grandfather finished, and laughed.

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JC wasn't feeling quite so confident later in the day as he sat impatiently in the office of Phoenix Press's business manager and watched a tight-lipped woman in her fifties scurry about in haphazard, disorganized fashion looking for the most recent financial figures. She should have known exactly where they were -- the press should have had up-to-date, precise information on everything, particularly since they were losing so much money. As JC watched her settle uncomfortably in her seat, clicking her mouse and staring anxiously at her computer screen, he felt annoyance spread quickly through his chest and settle in his abdomen. He couldn't stand incompetence and inefficiency.

Hoping to ward off anger, JC stood up and wandered into the hallway, opening the catalog they'd handed him when he first walked in. The receptionist at the front desk had had absolutely no idea who he was until she'd heard the name Chasez -- after that, she'd gone wide-eyed and fluttery, giving him demure looks from under her eyelashes even as she phoned Tom Willston, the longtime director of the press. JC had spoken briefly and directly to Tom, explaining calmly and insistently that he wanted to see the financials right now, today, and that no, it wasn't necessary for them to prepare something formal, and could they just please direct him to the business department?

This was how JC liked to work -- he liked to walk into the middle of situations without being expected, liked to see how people responded to unforeseen complications, how they performed under pressure. He lifted his eyes from the catalog and looked through the doorway to see the business director chewing on her fingernail, still staring haplessly at her screen. So far, the press wasn't doing very well.

The catalog was competently designed and the copy was well written, but the books . . . well. JC flipped through page after page of esoteric titles and frowned. No wonder they were losing money. He was fine with unconventional subject matter, but if that's all they were doing . . .

JC sighed and felt himself growing impatient again, so he walked back into the business manager's office and stared expectantly at her.

"I -- I've just about got them, Mr. Chasez," she said nervously, and JC let his gaze harden a bit.

"Why is it taking you so long? Why is it you don't have these things at your fingertips?" he asked in the quiet, controlled voice he always used when he was beginning to fight his temper.

"Well, I mean to, of course, but there's so much to do -- so many --"

"Are you telling me that this press is not maintaining adequate financial records despite the fact that it's running a huge deficit?" JC asked even more softly and watched her squirm in her desk chair.

"Well, we do, it's just -- we tend to wait until midway through the fiscal year before we do anything, and since that's a ways off right now . . ."

"Okay," JC said, and now he let steel slip into his voice, because it was time -- it was beyond time. "Print out your financial report for the last fiscal year and give it to me now. Right now."

With trembling hands, the woman -- Betty, he thought her name was? -- printed out a twelve-page document and handed it to him.

"This is it?" JC didn't bother to hide his disdain, and she nodded miserably.

JC walked out of her office without saying anything further to her, then headed straight to the press library, the place where copies of all Phoenix books still in print were currently stored. His grandmother had loved this room, and it still bore traces of her presence in the paintings on the wall, the rugs on the floor, the elegant curve of the reading lamps she'd chosen. JC took a seat and began to flip through the report.

Half an hour later, he was gripping his forehead and fighting off a throbbing headache. This was shit. This was worse than shit. They had no meaningful analysis, could tell him nothing about which titles had sold best, which subject areas were the most successful for them, which marketing campaigns had been effective. Beyond the occasional infusion of capital from a best seller here and there, this press had absolutely no idea where it stood.

Turning things around was going to take a lot more work than he'd first envisioned. JC closed his eyes for a moment, moved hands to his neck and absently massaged a sore spot, then exhaled heavily and got to his feet, grabbing the utterly inadequate financial figures and heading straight for the director's office. Come the new year, Tom Willston was going to get a much-needed early retirement.

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August

“You know, I think I’d rather have the couch facing the window,” Justin said thoughtfully, and smiled at the expected exasperated groan.

“Will you make up your mind?” Lance asked. “By the wall, by the window, at an angle. This is it,” he said firmly, standing up. “You make sure this is where you want it, ‘cause I’m not moving this behemoth of a couch again.”

Justin leaned down to grasp the bottom of his side of the couch and waited for Lance to grab the other side. “Don’t be insulting my couch,” he gasped as they lifted it. “It’s practically a

member of the family. I have many fond memories involving this couch."

Lance looked revolted. "Do not give me details," he warned, "or I'll drop this end right now."

"Just a little farther," Justin muttered, straining to keep his side up. "This way. No, this way," until finally the couch was positioned the way he wanted it. They set it down with identical grunts and Justin collapsed over the arm.

"Why did I say I'd help you move again?" Lance asked, breathing hard. "Oh yeah. You promised to feed me." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Yeah, yeah I got it," Justin said. "Relax," he suggested, grabbing his wallet from the top of a stack of boxes. "Sit down on my couch and enjoy the view. I'll be right back." He stifled a laugh as Lance aimed a horrified look at his giant orange couch, and jogged down the stairs.

Justin was smiling as he hit the sidewalk and headed to the corner deli for take-out. This was only his second day here, but already the man behind the counter greeted him with a smile; a neighbor had introduced herself in the lobby and handed over a stack of mail that had been left in her box by accident, and nobody had stolen his New York Times, despite it being left overnight in front of the mailbox wall.

He liked it here, he thought as he crossed the street and walked back to his apartment. It had been a mistake to stay in Cambridge past graduation. He hadn't minded working at Harvard University press; it had taught him a lot and he'd loved the work, but he'd felt restless, in need of a change. This, he thought happily, was exactly what he wanted. The big, bustling city, the new job at the well-respected and venerable commercial press, the new apartment. He was out of his rut, and ready to tackle his new life, and he couldn't be happier.

When he returned Lance had opened his newspaper and spread it out on Justin's narrow kitchen counter. He looked up guiltily when Justin came through the door, loaded down with paper bags, and quickly folded the section in front of him, sliding it under the sports section. "How about those Mets?" he asked loudly, and Justin blinked at him in puzzlement.

"What are you talking about?" he said as he set down the bags. "Give me that."

"Give you what?"

"Whatever you're hiding and looking so guilty about. Jesus."

Lance sighed and lifted the sports section, allowing Justin to slide what was underneath toward him. "The society pages?" he said with confusion. Then he caught sight of the picture on the front page.

Full color and taking up half the page, it was a close-up of JC Chasez, devastating in a formal black tuxedo, standing with a small group of glittering, beautiful people in expensive formal clothing. Justin tried to read the caption, and could not. His eyes were riveted on JC's face, the lazy smile, the sharp cheekbones and slightly sleepy eyes, the lean fingers wrapped around a crystal glass. His hair seemed a little shorter, he thought fuzzily, and then blinked hard when Lance reached over and whipped the paper out from under his hands.

“Tell me you’re not still thinking about that fucking asshole,” Lance said fiercely.

“I’m not still thinking about that fucking asshole,” Justin responded automatically. The smile he raised to Lance’s face was a little wistful. “He sure is hot, though.”

“Very hot,” Lance agreed evenly. “Too bad he’s such an asshole. Too bad he never called you.”

“Dude, not only did he not call me, he never even asked for my number.” Justin shrugged, elaborately nonchalant, and started pulling containers of food out of the bags. “Grab me a soda, will you?”

Lance turned to the small refrigerator, but his eyes were sharp on Justin’s face. “Well, good,” he said quietly. “Because I don’t want to see you moping around like you did when you were at my house last June.” He handed Justin a soda can and cracked another one open for himself. “You know what? We should go out tonight. We never did get to that club I told you about. We could go there, celebrate you finally becoming a resident and stuff. What do you say?”

Justin shrugged, unwrapping his sandwich and taking a healthy bite. “You know, I’m pretty tired. Maybe next week? Let me get the first week of my new job under my belt.”

Lance studied him carefully. “Justin, what exactly did that guy do to you? Because this isn’t like you at all.”

“What?” Justin said defensively. “He didn’t do anything to me, I’m just tired. I’m not in the mood to go out. It’s not a big deal.”

“Uh huh,” Lance said skeptically, but he let it drop and Justin was relieved.

The fact was that Justin had spent far more time than was healthy thinking about That Night With JC, as he’d started to refer to it in his head. There were memories that had the power to make his skin break into goose bumps even now, memories that involved the warm, smooth feel of JC’s skin, the silky tone of his voice, the touch of his hands, now gentle, now firm. He felt himself break out into a sweat just remembering the way his body had felt, the sounds and words JC had coaxed from him.

But then he remembered -- always, always he forced himself to remember -- the perfunctory way he’d been dismissed at dawn. It worked like a cold shower, and Justin turned back to his food, smoothing out his frown so that Lance wouldn’t question him further. He needed to stop thinking about JC, he told himself firmly, and with an effort kept himself from looking at the picture in the newspaper again. It was absolutely certain that JC wasn’t thinking about him.

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Justin entered the lobby of Phoenix Press and took a deep breath, suppressing a shit-eating grin so his new co-workers wouldn’t think he was an idiot. Phoenix was one of the oldest, most prestigious presses in the world, and Justin could almost feel the excitement, the bustle

as hundreds of people worked on thousands of books, made critical decisions about editing and design, worked against publishing deadlines. He introduced himself to the lobby receptionist and tried to wait quietly as she called his new boss, Joey Fatone. He was almost fidgeting in excitement and anticipation.

The lobby was tastefully decorated in tones of mauve and burgundy with deep cherry wood accents. Justin resisted the comfortable furniture in the waiting area and the dignified brochures detailing upcoming publications. He walked to the wall by the waiting area and examined the many awards on the wall, awards for design, for editing, many, many awards for bestsellers. Justin felt a flush of pride as he moved along the wall. He'd loved the press at Harvard, but always he'd craved the excitement of a big commercial press. It was such a thrill to be here, to be working on books that could be reviewed by the best reviewers in the world, to meet and work with best-selling authors. He couldn't wait to get started.

"Justin," came a jovial voice, and he turned to see Joey Fatone walking toward him with a big smile. He looked a little harried -- his hair looked like he'd run an egg beater through it, and his button-down shirt was wrinkled and untucked. But he seemed pleased to see Justin as he shook his hand and ushered him out of the lobby.

There was an interesting level of tension in the halls and Justin's smile faded as he saw people scurrying madly about, their faces tense. "Nothing for you to worry about," Joey said cheerfully as he led Justin down a wide hallway. "Marketing lost some important art that nonfiction editing needed, and their manager's on a rampage and threatening to have the entire department fired if they don't find it." He shot another smile at Justin as they left the chaos behind them and climbed another set of wide, thickly carpeted stairs. "It's just the normal noises around here," he continued, and Justin followed him, eyes wide.

Joey continued to chatter genially as they continued on, stopping to introduce Justin to people they passed as "Justin Timberlake, acquisitions wunderkind from Haaaarvard." Everyone they met seemed nice, greeting him easily and teasing Joey for being an ivy league snob. Justin felt happier and happier -- he was going to really like it here.

"This will be your office," Joey said, opening a door and gesturing grandly inside, and Justin felt the grin almost split his face. It wasn't huge and it was long and narrow and a little oddly shaped. But there was a state of the art flat screen computer monitor on a spacious desk, a long window that didn't look directly into anyone else's office window, and a door with a lock. It was fabulous, he thought happily as he set his messenger bag down and tugged at the high-backed, ergonomically correct chair. He couldn't ask for anything more.

There was a loud crash when Justin pulled the chair from the desk, and he blinked in confusion at the messy pile of boxes and thick envelopes that had been stacked precariously on the seat of the chair and were now scattered all over the floor. They looked like manuscripts. A lot of manuscripts, he thought, his smile fading.

"Oh," Joey said as Justin stared. "I figured you'd want to get started right away," he said with a coaxing smile. "Those are just some things that have, uh, kind of slipped through the cracks." The smile grew bigger and Justin felt himself smiling back; Joey was kind of hard to resist. "Just take a look, okay? Let me know what you think."

Justin stacked the pile on his otherwise clean desk while Joey told him that he'd be sharing an assistant with two other editors, then handed him a security pass and keys for the employee entrance, employee restroom, and his office door.

"I'll just leave you to settle in," Joey said cheerfully, leaving Justin to eye the stack of manuscripts. "If you get any phone calls from authors, um, it'll probably have to do with one of those envelopes there. I've been having my assistant tell people that you'll be handling them."

The top envelope, Justin noted with alarm, was postmarked eight months ago. He looked helplessly up at Joey as panic started to stir.

Joey's grin seemed to fill the doorway. "Coffee or soda in the kitchen down the hall and we'll have lunch today, okay? I can show you all the cheapest, most filling places in the neighborhood." He winked at Justin and disappeared.

Justin sat down at his new desk and stared, dumbfounded, at the teetering pile of boxes and manila envelopes. Right on cue the black telephone on his desk started to ring and he looked at it in horror until it stopped. The message light was already blinking.

Justin took a deep breath and laughed. "Big city. Big press. This is what you wanted," he reminded himself. "So here we go." He found a letter opener in his top drawer and grabbed the top envelope, slicing it open and pulling out the first manuscript.

January

January

"Justin, man, thank god you're here," Joey said as Justin passed the open door to his office. Justin paused and looked in at his supervisor and friend.

"How can you even think amid such filth?" Justin asked, gazing over the chaos that was Joey's office and leaning casually against the door jamb. Joey shrugged and made a face at him. They'd established soon after Justin arrived that their work styles and habits were grossly dissimilar.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah -- tell me something I don't know. Your author meeting go okay?"

"I think so." Justin spoke guardedly, because he really wasn't quite sure -- he thought he'd been able to convince Thomas Kearney that Phoenix Press was the best publisher for his book, but Justin had heard that the man was also being courted by several other larger houses, and Kearney hadn't reacted well when Justin had tried to push their conversation toward talk of a contract. This made Justin very uneasy.

"Wherever you just went, I'd appreciate it if you came back."

Justin startled a bit, then looked apologetically at Joey, who was obviously amused.

"Sorry. It's just that I really want this guy for us, and he's playing hard to get."

Joey rolled his eyes. "Why you persist in making a play for people we're never gonna sign anyway is beyond me, Justin. Seriously? You'd be a lot happier if you did what I do, which is rely on the contacts you already have instead of going out there and playing social director. It works just as well and it's a hell of a lot less stressful."

"Yeah, but Joey, I still think -- I mean, we've talked about this before, but I think it helps, you know? To diversify the list a bit," Justin carefully said, because this was another area of philosophical difference between them. "Your list is solid -- I mean, no one does better serious studies of musicology and music theory, so I think that for my part, I should -- well. You know. Bring in things that might have a wider audience."

"Yes, yes," Joey said aimlessly, already checking out, and Justin sighed a little. Thus far, Joey had been a great boss, but he refused to argue matters like these, preferring to continue along the path he'd established years ago, when the landscape of publishing was vastly different. Someday Justin was really going to have a serious conversation with him about it, because he had a horrible, unsettling feeling that their department -- the music division of acquisitions -- was losing money, and that this would not be allowed to continue indefinitely.

But now was not the time for that.

Joey gestured expansively and focused on Justin again. "Sit -- make yourself comfortable."

Justin looked dubiously at the single chair in the office. It was covered with Joey's interoffice mail: memos from others in the acquiring department announcing their new books (several of these were from Justin, although he was pretty sure Joey had no idea of it), various catalogs from other publishers, and several envelopes and boxes bulging with the telltale shape of manuscripts. Justin, who had his assistant neatly catalogue and log in each new manuscript the moment it arrived, glanced in alarm at the postage mark on one of them: it had probably been sitting in this chair for at least a month.

"Jesus, Joey -- wanna maybe look at your mail once in a blue moon?" he jibed, and Joey laughed.

"I don't know why, man -- it's always the same stupid shit. Um -- yeah. Go ahead and put that there," he said as he watched Justin carefully transfer the pile to the floor since all other available surfaces in the office were already covered.

Situating himself uneasily in the too-small chair, Justin looked levelly at his boss. "Okay, so shoot."

Joey sighed, then glanced at the door. "I'm not gonna close the door because I don't wanna look suspicious, but we've got to keep this conversation down, okay? I don't want anyone to know about this."

"Joey, you know I keep my mouth shut. There's nothing to worry about."

"I know, I know," Joey said, and sighed. He really must have been shaken, Justin realized. Normally, he was supremely unbothered by the ebb and flow of office life -- probably far too unbothered, but that was just Joey's nature.

"Okay," Joey finally said. "So this is about the new director. I know you've probably heard that we're getting someone new in here, right?"

Justin nodded. Gossip had been flying fast about it but until now, he really hadn't concerned himself with it. It simply hadn't seemed relevant to him -- he was so far down the totem pole that it would probably take months for any director even to discover his name.

"Yeah. Well, so this new guy came in today to introduce himself at the all-staff meeting --"

Guilt washed over Justin. "Oh my god -- I totally forgot about that. When I scheduled this author meeting, I --"

Joey waved his hand in a dismissive fashion. "Don't worry about it, Justin -- I knew you were gonna be gone."

Justin still felt uneasy. "But I should've been there, should've seen --"

"Well, you weren't, and it's okay, and you have to shut up now so I can tell you more about it, okay?"

Justin relaxed into his chair a bit. "Yeah. Sorry. Go on."

Joey took a deep breath and shook his head. "Basically, he's an asshole, Justin, a first-class asshole, and you know I don't apply that label liberally, so take that for what it's worth."

Justin widened his eyes in amazement. He'd never seen Joey take such a violent dislike to someone from the start. "That is not good. That is really, really not good."

"Tell me about it." Joey rolled his eyes. "He got up there in front of all of us in his fancy designer suit and told us we didn't know the first thing about publishing, told us we had no idea what we were doing."

Justin frowned. Oh god.

"Then, he started going department by department, saying we were all totally irresponsible about money, and when he got to acquiring -- man, Justin. He was all, 'And I'm quite frankly astounded that none of you has any idea how many of your books are even financially viable, and we're going to put a stop to that -- right now, that will stop.' And I just -- we're not in this for the money, you know? No one here is."

Justin bit his lip a bit. No, he wasn't here for the money, but a small, traitorous part of him couldn't help but sympathize with the general drift of what Joey was telling him. The press really did need to think more about what worked and what didn't.

"Wow," he said for Joey. "That's really -- wow. Pretty incredible for a first speech. I mean, not exactly the way I'd want to introduce myself to my new company."

"Exactly," Joey said with feeling. "He was cold and critical, just a real jerk about it. And what's better still is that not only is he going to be Mr. Bottom Line Money Means Everything, he's also going to micro-manage -- and that is just -- we do not work that way, Justin, we absolutely don't."

That did give Justin pause. "Micro-manage how?"

"Well, he tried to conceal it, tried to put it in terms of getting to know what our jobs are, to figure out our systems and stuff, but the baseline is this: he's gonna be at every department meeting for a while -- all of 'em."

"God," Justin said in amazement, because that did sound awful.

"Yeah." Joey cast his eyes toward the ceiling, then looked unhappily back at Justin. "So, it's gonna be tough for a while."

Justin looked unhappily around the chaos that was Joey's office and tried to stop his whirling mind.

"Jesus. I don't even know what to say. I guess . . . maybe I should know his name at least?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something fancy and foreign," Joey said viciously, then had the good grace to look a bit abashed. "Um, not that that's necessarily a bad thing."

Justin looked steadily at him. "Nothing? You can't remember anything other than that?"

"Sorry, but no," Joey said unhappily. "I must've blocked it out. Anyway, you'll know soon enough, because he's called a big meeting with acquisitions for Wednesday."

"Wednesday." That was just two days away. The sinking feeling was back, and Justin stood up quickly to make it go away. "I -- man. I guess I'll go down to my office and start trying to work up financials for my books or something."

Joey laughed. "I'd hold off on that for right now. I mean, it could be that this guy just comes off poorly on first impression, and you should probably wait until you meet him yourself to form an opinion."

Justin frowned.

"And at any rate, you and I -- we can make it through anything if we just stick together. You got me? Know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Justin said, but he didn't quite believe it. It sounded like change was definitely on the way, and he, for one, definitely wanted to be prepared for it.

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JC sat very still in his office chair, then twirled it so he was looking out the windows at the city and closed his eyes for a few seconds, breathing deep, trying to relax the tension in his neck and upper back. Another rotten day in another rotten week, and if he didn't know deep in his heart that he really did love this press, really did want it to succeed, he'd come in here on a weekend and burn the damn place down.

He'd obviously been hanging out with the corporate finance crowd for too long, because nearly every person he encountered at this press seemed either defensive or incompetent, and often both at once. There had been a few intelligent faces down in marketing when he'd spoken with them earlier in the day -- most of that department was probably going to be salvageable. Not so, however, the art department, and JC grimaced again as he thought of Peter Brumbridge, ninety-two and a publishing legend in himself, and how difficult it had been to say to him (and also everyone under him) that he thought it'd be best for them to start over elsewhere.

But it had had to be done: their covers were lackluster and uninteresting and their book designs much the same. They'd refused to learn how to use computers and were operating at a much higher cost as a result; plus, they'd been freelancing a good deal of their designs anyway to enable themselves to work at a glacial pace on the few books a year each of them did take on. JC's suggestion that they all take intensive training to get themselves up to speed technologically had been met with blank, unwelcoming stares -- and that had more than anything decided him in this regard. He would always attempt to help people who were willing to work with him, but intransigence coupled with ignorance were never, ever acceptable in his world. None of this had made it any easier to give Peter Brumbridge the bad news, but JC had almost thought he'd seen a degree of relief in the old man's eyes during that most awful of meetings.

Maybe. That of course was what he'd wanted to see.

JC sighed and rubbed the side of his neck. At least he'd negotiated a decent severance package for Brumbridge -- the man would not go uncared for, would not be thrown out in the wind. But JC had also seen the faces of everyone else in the building as the news had spread: they were furious, terrified, and uneasy, and the tension was seeping through the walls. It wasn't easy to be the object of so much fear and scorn, but JC was used to it. He got called cold, but he also got results.

And he was going to get results at this press if it killed him, JC thought, and slowly turned back to his desk to look at the forecast for the fall list the various divisions of the acquiring department had given him. Apart from the fiction list, about which he had nothing to say -- the editors here were eminent and this press had always been known for publishing serious literary fiction -- he was skeptical and alarmed at the rest of the titles and synopses he read. The history titles were boring and mundane, the memoirs they'd commissioned seemed like whiny sob stories, and the music list . . . JC frowned and flipped to it. The music list made no fucking sense, and JC hated it when things didn't make sense. Part of the list was absolute publishing death: musicology, for god's sake, and theory, the kind of thing university presses should be dealing with, not commercial publishers. This press could sustain some of that, but certainly not as much as it had right now.

There were also some more promising titles on the sheet: something to do with race in popular music, a history of country music in Nashville, an analysis of hip-hop culture and consumerism. But after this dim ray of light, the list switched back to the obscure and the unpublishable. Who the fuck thought an analysis of chord progressions in medieval chant music would interest more than two people in the entire world? JC certainly didn't.

Breathe, he reminded himself, because he was getting angry all over again, and it wasn't fair to anyone to go into a meeting with one's mind already made up. The people who worked on the music list might have a perfectly good reason for its scattered, chaotic shape, and if they could defend their choices well . . . Well, JC would still make them change it, but he would at least be able to do so with respect instead of disdain.

The intercom buzzed. "Sir, I just wanted to remind you that you have a meeting with acquiring in five minutes," JC's assistant said.

"Thank you," JC told him, then got up from his chair, grabbed his notes, and headed down to the conference room.

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The news about the art department had definitely spread, JC realized as he watched the acquisitions department straggle into the room and sit at strategically far-away places from him. They looked tense and unhappy, and several of them were anxiously riffling through stacks of notes.

JC had no problem with that. He'd rather have prepared, frightened people than prepared, hostile people. It was a large acquisitions department, with divisions in fiction, history, creative nonfiction, music, and psychology, and JC knew that to truly understand what was

going on, he'd have to attend not only larger meetings such as this one but also their smaller subject-area ones. It would take forever, but he was prepared to do that, was prepared to do anything that would enable him to figure out what the fuck was rotten here at Phoenix Press.

Except for the chairs on either side of JC, the conference room quickly filled up, and JC decided to start the meeting two minutes before it had been scheduled. He liked for people to be in their places slightly early, and this was a failsafe to ensure that that would happen in the future. He looked calmly around the table and started his opening pitch.

"As many of you may know, I'm here to analyze the various components of this press and to restructure it so that it remains a viable, profitable company," he said, and held back his annoyance as he watched them wince. They all seemed upset when he called the press a company -- but that was part of the problem: that was exactly the kind of thinking that needed to be abolished. They needed to be reminded that at the end of the day, this was a business.

"In so doing, I'm going to be attending a lot of your meetings, and I'm going to meet with each of the divisions in this department separately. It seems that in the past it's been an established practice for acquiring editors to launch a book and then forget about it. That's not going to happen anymore," he said in a serious, quiet voice, and watched hands fidget on the table, mouths twist anxiously. "From now on, I want all of you to be aware of what happens to the books you're bringing in from the very beginning to the very end. I want you to understand which of the titles you've acquired are selling and which aren't, and why -- and I want you to use all of that information as you search for new books. In short, I'm looking for more accountability. I'm looking for all of you to show me why the books you're bringing in deserve to be here."

The room was stonily silent as JC finished speaking, and he took a moment to look steadily at each person. "Any questions so far?"

More silence, except for a quiet shuffling at the door, the first late arrival. JC looked up and took him in, and Jesus, Jesus fucking Christ, he was beautiful, even with that uncomfortable, guilty look on his face. There was something vaguely familiar about him -- something JC couldn't quite place -- but now was not the time to think about that.

Sometimes JC called people out in meetings and sometimes he didn't. It wasn't always a good idea to put employees on the spot, though at times, it sent a powerful message. JC looked again at the broad shoulders and long legs of the gorgeous late guy and decided that this was definitely the time to call someone out.

"Hello, Mr. . . ." he began, and watched the color on the young man's face spread down his throat as his embarrassment increased exponentially.

"Timberlake," he said in a quiet, miserable voice. "Justin Timberlake."

"Good morning, Mr. Timberlake," JC said. "I'm Mr. Chasez, and I'm the one who scheduled this meeting. I'm so glad you could make it -- I hope it wasn't interfering with your busy schedule."

"Sir, no. I --" Justin Timberlake -- god, he looked familiar, really, really familiar -- said, and glanced frenziedly at the clock, which told him that he was not, in fact, late at all. JC watched in fascination as he thought that through, watched him try to decide whether to defend himself or to take the badgering. That was a good sign -- JC liked people who considered things before they talked.

"I'm sorry, and I won't be late again," Timberlake finally said, and began looking anxiously around the room for a chair to sit in. JC, who knew full well that the only open chairs were the ones beside him, said, "There's a seat right here, Mr. Timberlake. Please take it and stop holding us up."

The room was deadly silent as the young man slowly moved to the chair next to JC and sat down. He was beyond nervous: his hands were shaking a little, and he seemed deeply reluctant to make eye contact. JC filed all of that away -- he was probably junior here; he was young; he was sill learning the ropes -- and then went back to running the meeting.

"All right. You've all prepared reports on your projected fall lists for me. What I'd like right now is for the head of each department to briefly summarize those lists. Let's start with fiction -- and introduce yourself before you speak. Aside from Mr. Timberlake here, I don't yet know your names."

As Elise Martin talked about novels, JC became increasingly convinced that he did know Justin Timberlake. There was something about the hand he'd placed on the table, something about the curve of his neck as he turned to watch Elise, something about the profile -- the long, strong nose, the sweet, small mouth -- that felt very, very familiar. Dammit -- it was going to bother him until he figured it out. JC tried to put Justin out of his mind, to pay attention to the ongoing speech, but it was difficult; it was unnecessarily difficult and annoying.

"Thank you, Ms. Martin," he said calmly after she'd finished. "I'll be at your division meeting tomorrow morning. Right now, however, I'd like all the fiction editors to leave. I want to speak with the nonfiction people."

After the shuffling and nervous coughing had died down, JC sat in front of a much smaller group of people and gazed steadily at them.

"I'm going to be very frank," he said in a grave tone of voice. "Your lists are a mess. Save for a few exceptions, your acquiring practices show little to no rhyme or reason, and absolutely no responsiveness to any sort of market analysis. Quite simply, all of you seem unaware of the current trends in both publishing and in your respective fields, and that is going to stop. Do you hear me?"

Horror-stricken faces, and some anger, too, which JC actually wasn't too upset about in this context. If none of them tried to defend themselves he'd have even less respect for them. Next to him, Justin Timberlake coughed once, then breathed deeply in and out, trying to calm himself. JC held back a smile. Mr. Timberlake had better be worried -- they all better had.

"Take, for example, the music list," he said, and was rewarded with a flurry of movement from Justin, who in the space of ten seconds crossed and uncrossed his legs, rubbed the back

of his neck, sat forward in his seat and then leaned back, and then finally let out a quiet sigh and rested his elbows on the table.

"I see some very promising titles here, books about rap music, about popular culture, analyses of the ways people engage with and listen to music, the way it works in their lives. That, people, is the kind of thing I like. And yet looking further down this list, I see, what -- choral progression? The history of B-flat from 1856 to 1892?"

A few people chuckled at JC's note of incredulity -- but not Justin Timberlake.

"Look. What I'm saying here is that there seems to be no plan. This is a chaotic, unorganized list: it's messy and ill-conceived, and I quite simply don't understand the thinking behind it."

"Well, um." More fidgeting from Justin, and JC sat back in his seat to watch. "Sir, I -- if I could, I think I might be able to speak to that a little bit. Please don't think I'm rejecting your analysis outright, but there are some things I'd like to say about that list. The music list."

JC nodded once. "So say them, Mr. Timberlake. Like I said, I'd absolutely love an explanation."

Oh, he was nervous, and his voice shook a little, and there was something almost . . . Southern in it, and --

And suddenly, JC remembered that voice in another context entirely, remembered hearing it say, "God, JC, please. Now," remembered Justin all spread out and breathless and gorgeous on his bed, Justin arching his back desperately up toward him, begging JC to fuck him.

JC shifted uneasily in his seat and pressed a hand to his chin, fighting for control, immediately resentful of Justin Timberlake for coming in here and upsetting his equilibrium, for making a difficult meeting even more difficult, and for -- well, for being one of the most satisfying one-night stands he'd ever had. It was amazing that he'd forgotten him, because god, he'd been incredible.

Flicking eyes over the curve of Justin's shoulders, JC very nearly sighed, and then sat up very straight, horrified at himself. This was so far from appropriate it wasn't even funny. He was the boss here -- he was running this company, and it was most emphatically not his style to fraternize with employees in a romantic or sexual fashion. He was going to have to forget everything he knew about Justin, was going to have to be as cool and as careful with him as he knew how.

JC looked once more at Justin, then carefully bit down on the inside of his lower lip. Great. Just great.

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Justin’s heart was pounding so hard he couldn’t believe that the people he passed in the hall didn’t notice. It was all he could do to keep his steps to their usual pace, to keep from sprinting down the long hall the way his adrenaline-charged body demanded.

He rounded the corner and risked a glance at his reflection as he passed the small decorative mirror over the flower arrangement in an alcove. He looked pretty normal -- head up, shoulders back, calm, cool and collected. Except for the flush across his cheeks, he didn't look like he'd just had one of the most humiliating encounters in his entire life.

He passed the assistant he shared with two other editors with a neutral smile and waved off his attempt to hand him a message slip.

"But, Justin . . ." David said, holding up a pink piece of paper.

"In just second," he promised and lunged into his small office like it was a haven, swatting blindly at the door behind him. He threw himself into his chair and took a deep shuddering breath. Then he grabbed the phone and punched the number from memory.

"This is Lance Bass, how may I . . ." said the deep, smooth voice.

"It's me," Justin interrupted urgently.

"Justin?" Lance questioned, his formal manner falling away. "What's up?"

"I'll tell you what's up," Justin said tightly. "Dude, you are not going to believe this. I just got out of this meeting . . ."

"Actually, Justin, I'm just about to go *into* a meeting, so this'll have to wait until after . . ."

"With JC Chasez," Justin finished, and smiled with grim satisfaction as Lance went silent with a small choking sound.

"You're kidding," he breathed, and Justin closed his eyes and shook his head, forgetting that Lance couldn't see him. "You're kidding, Justin, oh my god. This is the new director, the one the parent corporation sent?"

"Yep," Justin said bitterly. The misery of the last hour started to spread through him. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Your new boss?" Lance asked incredulously.

"Yep," Justin said again.

Lance was silent. "Jesus. What did he say to you?"

Justin rolled his eyes. "Well, he looked at me and said 'Oh, hey, Justin. I remember you from that morning last summer when I kicked your naked ass out of my bed at daybreak. I've been meaning to call you, how are you doing?'" He laughed a little, but it was hollow. "What the fuck do you think he said?"

"Oh my god." Lance's voice was rich with sympathy and Justin resisted the urge to beat his forehead on his desk. "He didn't even remember you. Right?"

"Right," Justin said quietly.

“Justin, I told you that guy . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. You said he was an asshole and you know what? You were totally right, Lance. JC Chasez, my new fucking boss, is a huge fucking asshole.” Justin rubbed his hand over his forehead and closed his eyes.

“Mr. Timberlake,” came a smooth voice from behind him, and Justin whirled in his chair and froze.

JC was standing in his open doorway, his *open doorway*, and behind him Justin could see his own assistant, wide-eyed and still waving the pink message slip at him. The world slowed down and seemed to go oddly silent for a moment. In his ear Lance was saying something soothing but starting to laugh, and Justin slowly replaced the receiver without looking at the telephone.

JC stared at him, his eyes brilliantly blue and sharp as a razors. A small, humorless smile played over his full lips and Justin took a deep breath and rose from his chair. His face felt like it was on fire. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but JC’s slightly lifted eyebrow stopped him.

“Next time,” JC said in a deceptively mild tone, “you might consider closing your door before you make personal phone calls.” His eyes raked once down Justin’s form and Justin trembled.

“My office. Ten minutes,” JC said. He moved a single step closer and lowered his voice. “You know the one: executive level, big office in the corner. The one that says ‘fucking asshole’ on the door.” And then he was gone.

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When Justin presented himself at JC’s door it was exactly eleven minutes later. He’d shut his office door for real this time and done some deep breathing exercises, visited the restroom and composed himself as much as he possibly could. He’d been unforgivably careless, he told his reflection as he splashed cold water on his flushed cheeks. Unprofessional and disrespectful, and he owed JC -- Mr. Chasez, he reminded himself -- an apology. And, he told himself firmly, squashing the bitter voice that still whined about the way he’d been treated on that infamous morning-after, he completely deserved whatever crushing set-down that was about to be delivered.

Outwardly calm, Justin faced JC’s closed door and raised his hand to knock.

“Are you looking for Mr. Chasez?”

Justin jumped a foot at the sound of the voice behind him, and he cursed himself. He didn’t realize he’d been so tightly wound.

“I’m sorry,” JC’s assistant said politely, his eyes mirthful. “I didn’t mean to startle you. But Mr. Chasez left for lunch. You just missed him,” he added helpfully.

“Thank you,” Justin said, relieved that his voice came out normally. He hesitated for a moment -- why had he been ordered to appear if JC was planning on leaving? Was Justin late? He checked his watch in a small panic, but it was only a couple of minutes past the designated meeting time. His mind spun as he turned away from the corner office and made his way slowly back to his own. Maybe he was late, maybe his watch was slow, maybe JC had decided he didn’t want to talk to him, maybe JC had intended for Justin to go to lunch with him. He grimaced as he recalled the lack of humor in those icy blue eyes. That last option wasn’t likely.

He returned to his office and checked his voice mail. A cautious call from Lance, hoping that Justin hadn’t hung up on him for the reason he was afraid he had. An automated reminder from his dentist’s office about his appointment on Friday. Nothing from JC.

Tension clutched his stomach as he turned to his computer and checked his email. Nothing. He jumped up and poked his head out the door to speak to David, but there were no messages waiting for him there either. Justin carefully and deliberately closed his door and sank into his chair, staring unseeingly out the window. His nerves jittered and he fidgeted uncomfortably.

For the rest of the afternoon Justin alternated between chewing his fingernails and traveling the halls between his office and JC’s, waiting for his return. He wished he’d insisted on apologizing immediately for the remark when JC had still been in his office. He wished he’d been two minutes earlier to his command performance with JC. He wished this confrontation were already over with.

The light gradually grew dim outside as Justin waited and fretted and got no work done whatsoever. Lance called again and offered to meet him for dinner; Justin said no, he had to wait until JC returned before he could leave. His assistant said goodnight and went home. Justin stared out the window. Joey appeared in his doorway and asked him why he was still there. When he told him he was supposed to meet with Mr. Chasez Joey rolled his eyes and wished him a heartfelt good luck before beating a hasty retreat. Machines were turned off, the telephones stopped ringing. The halls emptied out and grew dark and silent.

At 7:30 Justin made a final trip to the corner office on the top floor, striding slowly through the darkened hallways. JC certainly would not be returning to the office this late; Justin would have to come in first thing in the morning and talk to him then. He thought about leaving a note and cursed himself for not sending JC an email as soon as he discovered he’d left that afternoon. Could he leave a polite and professional apology in writing? Should he?

Justin turned the last corner and his steps faltered -- the door to JC’s office was open and the lights were on. He was there, and all of Justin’s hard-won composure drained away. He stopped dead, leaning for a moment against the wall. What on earth was he going to say?

Get this over with, he told himself viciously, and strode to the open doorway before he had time to think about it for another second.

JC was seated at his big desk, making handwritten notes on a pad of paper as he spoke quietly into a cordless telephone headset. He caught Justin’s movement in the corner of his eye and looked up sharply, his eyes freezing Justin into immobility as his hand was raised to

tap at the open door. For a moment they stared hard at each other and Justin felt himself flush.

JC raised his chin and nodded unsmilingly, then jerked his eyes toward one of the chairs arranged in front of his desk, indicating to Justin that he should be seated. Justin crossed a huge expanse of carpeted floor and sank silently into the chair as JC resumed making notes and speaking quietly into the headset. His eyes skated over JC's face and his hands and his long narrow fingers, and he felt his body flush with heat. Justin jerked his eyes away and stared at his own knees, forcing himself to be calm.

"That's good, and I'll expect them by the end of this week," JC said with deceptive politeness, and wound up his telephone call. Justin heard him pull the headset from his head, and it was an excruciatingly painful effort to drag his eyes from his knees and look up at a stony-faced JC.

"I apologize for that remark you overheard," Justin said simply. "It was unprofessional and careless, and I am really sorry that you heard it."

JC's eyebrows went up, and he did not smile. "But not sorry that you said it, am I right?"

Justin struggled with that for a moment, and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"I'm curious," JC drawled, and Justin suppressed a shiver at the sound of his voice, the low and quiet tone. "We've had one meeting here, Mr. Timberlake. Just *one* meeting. How is it that you've decided I'm a -- now how did you put it? -- a 'big fucking asshole' already?"

Justin looked at him, startled. JC really didn't remember him, he realized with a humiliation that made him want to writhe. He seemed to think that the comment he'd overheard Justin make was about his plans for the press, or his presence there. But that was good, wasn't it? Justin licked his lips as he formulated a reply.

"I don't think what you have planned for the press is necessarily bad," he said carefully. "I mean, it's been obvious -- even in the relatively short amount of time that I've been here -- that there need to be some changes." He squirmed in his seat and rubbed his sweating palms on his pants. "I don't think that the changes you have in mind -- or at least some of them -- are necessarily a bad thing."

JC regarded him steadily from across the huge expanse of his desk and Justin lifted his chin defiantly. He would not be intimidated, he told himself fiercely.

"Nice," JC murmured in a low voice, and Justin bit the inside of his lip to keep from reacting. "That didn't address my question at all, but it was a very pretty and correct thing to say." He cocked his head and leaned back in his chair before continuing. "Let me respond in kind, and tell you that I'm pleased to know that I can count on someone in acquisitions. Even," and now he smiled the slightest bit, his eyes clear and cold, "someone as insubordinate and arrogant as yourself."

A protest rose swiftly but Justin choked it down. JC was just trying to provoke him, he cautioned himself. He was just trying to make him angry. He smoothed his expression with

an effort and gave JC a serene smile.

“So, are we even now?” he asked, and this time JC did smile.

“I believe we are,” he said, his voice mild in the silent room. His eyes returned to the papers on his desk, and Justin took that as a dismissal. He rose to leave, taking one more look at JC’s face, the sharp slant of his cheekbones, the thick fringe of his obscenely long eyelashes.

Abruptly, Justin felt angry. He’d spent a pathetic amount of time angsting about That Night With JC. He’d relived the highs and lows a dozen times in the last few months, wondering what he’d done, or not done, to get himself so summarily dismissed the following morning. He’d developed a ridiculous habit of scanning the damn society pages, guiltily hoping for a glimpse of the man that still haunted his waking moments as well as his dreams. And now here they were, and the object of all these thoughts didn’t even remember him. Resentment stirred violently in Justin, and on impulse he turned back.

“I just want you to know,” Justin said quietly, “that I’m not going to tell anyone about our, um, previous encounter. In fact, until today I’d almost forgotten about it myself,” he added, inspired. “And I don’t think it’s something anyone else needs to know.” He paused, aware of JC’s eyes fixed unblinkingly on him. “I’m sure you agree.”

The room was utterly silent, and tension grew inside Justin until he felt like he couldn’t breathe. JC stared at him with absolute inscrutability for what seemed like forever, examining his face and body while Justin stood still and tried not to tremble. Finally he set his pen down and brought his eyes up to meet Justin’s. Justin steeled himself.

“I find it incomprehensible,” JC said quietly, “that someone as smart and ambitious as you appear to be would be worried about an inconsequential one-night stand. Especially when you have so much work to do, and your job is at stake.” He lifted one elegant eyebrow. “That’ll be all, Justin. Goodnight.” He turned his attention back to the work on his desk, and Justin fled.

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Justin relaxed into his chair and took a long drink of coffee, wincing in pleasure at the hot, bitter taste, and then started reading the e-mail messages that had arrived since he'd first checked at 7:30 in the morning. The early part of his day had been devoted to scanning the last of a huge pile of manuscripts that Joey had given him -- it had taken Justin the better part of two weeks to go through them all, and he was quite pleased to have finally finished them off. At the end of his desk right now were three neat piles, evidence of his early morning's work. The largest consisted of rejections that he'd have his assistant contact the authors about, the second contained manuscripts for which Justin himself would write the rejection letters, and the third and smallest was made up of those few projects Justin was considering looking at more closely, the ones he really liked. Justin loved this part of the process, loved the first surge of excitement and promise that worked its way through him as he realized that a project was going to be really good, that it had great potential. Later would come the nitty gritty of review and revision: at this point, there was only hope and possibility.

As he stared at his computer screen, a message from Astrid Biltingham came through, chiming merrily as it appeared in his mailbox. The subject line was "Revisions," and Justin took a deep breath and froze a little bit as he opened it. Astrid Biltingham was an author he'd inherited from Joey. As a musicology professor, she generally wrote the sort of books Joey dealt with, but her latest manuscript was a study of Pretty Baby, a famous blues club in Chicago, a topic that had more trade potential than her other books. When Joey had realized this, he'd handed the project over to Justin. Pretty Baby had started as a speakeasy during Prohibition, then had survived to see a rich and colorful history that had included the Mob, murder, and the rise and fall of several noteworthy careers. Any book about it would be engaging, and there were many good qualities about Astrid Biltingham's manuscript. She had scrupulously charted the history of the club and the people who had performed in it and had placed the entire story in the larger context of the history of both Chicago and the blues.

However -- and Joey had pointed this out to Justin the minute he'd given him the manuscript -- Astrid Biltingham was used to writing primarily for other scholars, and her idea of what might be of interest to the general educated reader was almost amusingly skewed. Although she'd had access to fascinating interviews with several of the major players in the club's history, she'd skirted these in her text, referring to them only occasionally and instead devoting the bulk of her chapters to dry historical analysis. So many incredible things had happened at the club over the years, but Biltingham had rendered them in such lackluster language that the text was nearly impossible to move through easily. It had been Justin's goal as her editor to help her transform her manuscript into a trade book: he knew absolutely that if JC Chasez and Phoenix Press were to countenance publication, the prose would have to be made more appealing and engaging.

Joey had known Astrid Biltingham for years and had brought to Phoenix Press many of her serious works on the politics of improvisation in jazz music. She was eminent in academic and musicology circles, and the books she had done with Joey had won several awards and honors. As a result, she was a much-valued author in the Phoenix Press stable, though moreso for prestige than for book sales. In signing her up for this book, Joey had thus felt confident enough to offer a rather sizeable advance, particularly since the book was likely to be successful. The pressure to make that actually happen was now on Justin's shoulders.

"She's great to work with, Justin -- really great," Joey had said as he'd handed over the manuscript, and then had frowned a little. "But to be honest, I've never had to ask her to do much in the way of revision and rewriting, so we'll have to see how she responds when you ask her to shape this into a trade book."

Justin must have looked fairly dubious at that point, because Joey had laughed and then reached out to lightly punch him in the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, though. You'll charm her -- I'm absolutely confident of that.

In his letter to Biltingham about her manuscript, Justin had in very politic fashion started out with what was right about it, speaking in generous and admiring terms about its many strengths before moving on to the tricky part of the letter. He'd spent quite a lot of time mulling over what would be best for the book and had finally come to the conclusion that although she was clearly a talented writer of academic prose, she wasn't so well suited to produce the kind of accessible writing he wanted for this book. Even had he felt comfortable

asking her to completely overhaul her writing style, the immense task of articulating to her exactly how to do that had seemed too daunting; thus, Justin had happened upon an alternate idea he was rather proud of. Flipping through the roster of developmental editors Phoenix Press usually called on, Justin had found the perfect person, a woman both knowledgeable about blues music and capable of producing first-rate prose of the sort he was looking for. Thus, in the most diplomatic terms possible, he'd suggested in his letter to Astrid Biltingham that they bring in this editor to help with revision, that the two of them work together to produce a manuscript that would better fit the needs of the press.

After agonizing over the letter for quite some time, Justin had finally sent it early this morning, and he was more than a little concerned to see that Biltingham had fired back a response so quickly. It could mean that she had immediately embraced his idea, but given his experience with certain academics at Harvard University Press, Justin was a little skeptical on that point. Sighing a little, he clicked on the e-mail and began to read:

Mr. Timberlake:

You have profoundly misunderstood the purpose of my book, and I find your suggestion that I "dumb it down" to be extremely insulting. Do you really think so little of your readers? I firmly reject your suggestion that I "collaborate" with someone who is most certainly far less knowledgeable than I am about the subject, and I insist that you accept my manuscript exactly the way it is. I spent years writing this book, and several of my colleagues have reviewed it: all of them think that it is perfectly fine the way it is, and so do I. If you do not cease with your demands to revise this book out of existence, I will withdraw the manuscript from Phoenix Press.

Astrid Biltingham, PhD

"Jesus Christ," Justin murmured under his breath, his heart pounding and his breathing coming in quick, short spurts. He'd had rude authors before, but this was one of the nastier letters he'd gotten, and certainly one of the most condescending. As he reread the e-mail, the fury hit: how dare she talk to him like that? How dare she so totally reject his own area of competence and expertise? Who was she to think she knew publishing better than he did?

Justin took another swig of coffee and then quickly closed the e-mail, planning to respond to it later when he was calmer, but the anger and anxiety curled up and took residence in his stomach, refusing to go away. If he lost this book, he'd be in serious trouble. If he alienated one of Joey's best authors, Joey would never forgive him. One way or another, he had to address this, and fast.

As Justin started planning out the conversation he'd have with Joey, scratching out a few notes and trying to figure out the best way to present the situation to him, he became aware of movement at his door and slowly raised his head.

There stood JC Chasez, clad in power black and looking none too happily at him.

"Good morning," Justin said uncertainly. This was the first time he'd been alone with JC since the evening he'd stupidly, *stupidly* brought up their encounter the previous summer. Since

then JC had treated him with the same polite and remote precision he'd treated the rest of the press. Justin didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed about that.

"We need to talk." JC's voice was flat and cold, and Justin felt himself tense as he entered the office, shutting the door behind him and taking a seat in the chair before Justin's desk. For a moment, JC was silent as he looked cursorily around the office, eyes rapidly scanning the walls and the shelves before coming to land on the piles of manuscripts at the end of Justin's desk. It made Justin very uneasy.

"What's this?" JC asked, his eyes narrowing a bit.

"The department had something of a backlog," Justin said immediately, trying to keep his voice calm and level. "This is the last of it."

JC leaned forward, picked up a manuscript from the reject pile, and scanned the title page. "This is date-stamped three months ago."

It was getting rather hard to breathe. "I know, but it's taken care of now." There was no way in hell Justin was going to say, "I know, but these sat in Joey's office for weeks before I even knew about them," but it irked him that JC was now going to think that he wasn't on the ball.

"Do these authors even know that we have their manuscripts?"

"Yes. We send an acknowledgment card when they first arrive," Justin said, and held back a sigh. "It's just -- there's always a glut of things at the new year. People finish up their books over the Christmas holidays, then send them on in."

"I'm sure that's true, but this date says November," JC doggedly pointed out, and then shook his head, put the manuscript back, and relaxed into his chair again. "That's not what I'm here to talk to you about, though if this kind of lateness is common practice in your department, we really do need to address it."

"It's not -- it's really not," Justin said far too earnestly, and then winced inside as JC raised an eyebrow in polite disbelief. This was turning out to be a horrible day.

JC looked at him, his mouth pressed into a thin line. "All right, then. Tell me why I came to work to find a voice mail message from Astrid Biltingham threatening to withdraw her book from this press."

Justin took a deep breath, amazed at how much rudeness and unpleasantness could come from a single author, then tried to remember that she was protecting her book because she cared deeply about it, not because she was an awful human being. It was hard, though.

"Okay. Look. I took her over from Joey because her new book is tradey, but she's just not a trade author, you know? She's had all this success as an academic, and I think she's gotten used to not having to rewrite her stuff. But if we're going to be able to sell this book, then we have to get it rewritten in a more accessible fashion. So that's -- that's what I suggested to her."

JC crossed his arms and reclined slightly. "You suggested that she rewrite?"

Justin felt himself start to flush a little even though JC had spoken mildly. "Well, no, not exactly. I suggested that she work with a developmental editor, because frankly, I'm not sure she's even capable of rewriting."

"Did you at least give her the option of doing it herself?" JC's eyes were growing sharp now, and he'd lifted one hand to rub impatiently at his jaw, a sure sign of frustration. Justin's palms started to sweat.

"No, because I didn't think --"

JC held up a hand to stop him. "One of the press's most distinguished authors, and you suggested a ghostwriter?"

Justin knew he was red-faced now, and he knew his voice was going to shake when he spoke. "A developmental editor, not a ghostwriter."

"She's not going to hear that, Justin. She's not going to make that distinction."

Justin frowned. JC was probably right. "Really, it seemed the best thing to do at the time," he said weakly, embarrassed at the almost wheedling sound in his voice. "Most of my authors are just fine with that."

"And yet as you said before, she's not one of your authors."

Justin sighed. "Okay," he said miserably. "Okay, yeah. I blew that."

JC leaned forward in his chair, speaking coolly and quickly. "Yes you did, and now I need you to fix it. This press can't afford to alienate her right now, particularly since we offered her such a ridiculously high advance."

Justin frowned in puzzlement. "But our contracts state that if the publisher and author mutually agree to terminate publication, the author returns the advance."

"Not this one," JC said, and Justin's eyes widened in surprise. "For reasons I'm not even going to try to understand, we seem to have let her cross out that clause."

Justin coughed uncomfortably. He knew full well that Joey had negotiated that contract -- did JC know it too?

"So you see the dilemma I'm in here," JC said, fixing Justin with an intense, uncompromising gaze.

"I'm sorry -- I --"

JC stood up, neatly straightening his jacket and heading toward the door. "Don't apologize -- just fix it."

"I -- I will," Justin said as humiliation flooded him.

JC lightly rested a hand on the doorknob, then looked Justin straight in the eye. "I'll call her back and tell her she'll be hearing from you soon. I'm not going to let her refuse to revise, because that's asinine and I have a feeling that your assessment of the writing is probably correct, but I am going to let her know you'll be more accommodating with her from here on out."

"I -- okay. Yes." At least JC wasn't going to back her entirely. That was something.

"Good. Look -- I understand that she's unpleasant, but I expect you to handle this in a professional fashion, and I expect you to do it soon. I don't want to have to hear from Professor Biltingham ever again, Justin. Is that clear?"

"Yeah. I understand," Justin said glumly. JC nodded sharply at him, then left the office.

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"Aw, man," Joey said, grimacing and leaning so far back in his desk chair that Justin feared he'd tip over. "I am so sorry, Justin. I really didn't see that coming from her."

"I -- there's no need to apologize," Justin said, resisting the urge to add "just fix it" like JC had done to him. "But if you could maybe help me figure out a way to address this with her, that'd be great."

Joey scanned the e-mail again, shaking his head in amazement. "Really, I've never seen her act like this. And you say she called Chasez, too?"

"Yeah." It was impossible to hide the glumness in his voice. "I'm really sorry about this, really hope I haven't lost your author for you."

Joey planted his chair on the ground again, then spoke slowly and seriously. "I've known Astrid for a long time. She's a good writer and a smart academic, but I'm not going to let her push you around on this, Justin. She wants to write a trade book, she's going to have to make some compromises. She might feel comfortable snapping at you because you're new, but I'm not going to let her get away with that. If she's going to work with this press, then she's going to treat the staff with respect."

Joey really was a good boss. "Thanks, Joey. That means a lot."

"Yeah," Joey said absently, and began flipping through his Rolodex.

"Banner, Blondel, Bickhammer . . . Biltingham, Astrid. Yes." Immediately, Joey turned away from Justin and dialed the number.

"Astrid? Hey, it's Joey over at Phoenix. How are you?"

Justin had to smirk as that question was followed by a very long pause. Apparently Astrid had given Joey an earful.

"Yeah, I know, I know, we've maybe not been communicating as well as we'd like, but Astrid, I want you to know just how excited we are about this book, and how many high hopes we

have for it," Joey said. "Really, we're thrilled to have it."

Another long pause, and Justin bit his lip.

"Hey, know what?" Joey finally broke in. "I'd love to talk to you in person about this, and so would Justin. With the three of us together, I'm sure we can come up with a reasonable approach to this situation, don't you?"

Joey swiveled around in his chair and gave Justin a thumbs up signal. "Great, great. Um, well, how about lunch tomorrow? Would that work for you?"

By the time Joey hung up, he and Justin had a lunch date at an upscale Japanese restaurant for the very next day.

"Joey, thank you so much. Really," Justin said, reaching out to shake his hand.

"What good am I as a boss if I don't help you out every now and then?" Joey said, grinning, obviously enjoying himself and the drama of the situation. "We'll go in there tomorrow, fix this thing right up, and then you can go back to Chasez and tell him that everything's okay. Like I said, Justin, if we work together, then things will turn out for the best."

"Yeah, that's probably true."

"Oh, and one more thing," Joey said, and then gave Justin an evil grin. "Wear that navy suit tomorrow, the one you look so handsome in, okay?"

Justin rolled his eyes.

"Every little bit helps, J, I kid you not." Joey said seriously, and then lasted for about five good seconds before cracking up.

~ ~ ~ ~

Justin and Joey arrived at the restaurant before Astrid Biltingham did, which allowed them a little bit of time to strategize beforehand.

"Since I know her, it'd probably be best for me to do most of the talking at first," Joey said in a low voice, and scowled at the menu. "God, I hate this place, but it's one of her favorites, so I figured we'd be pretty well off here."

Justin looked at the spare, ascetic design of the restaurant -- the clean, sharp lines, the dim, indirect lighting -- and had to smile a little. It absolutely wasn't Joey's kind of place.

He and Joey were served green tea and handed menus, and Justin only just kept himself from whistling under his breath as he saw the prices. It would probably be a good idea to confirm who was picking up the tab.

"Um, Joe -- the press gets this, right?"

Joey snorted and nodded. "Are you kidding? There's no way I'd pay for this shit on my own."

Justin grinned at him, then sat back to wait for Astrid to arrive, fighting the urge to pull out the index card of talking points he'd prepared for himself before leaving the office. Joey had laughed at him outright when he'd studied it in the cab on the way to the restaurant, but Justin was glad he'd written it, glad he'd sat down to compile his thoughts. It was almost a good luck charm of sorts, and this was not a meeting he could afford to blow. He thought back to JC's firm words in his office yesterday and only just suppressed a shudder. It would do absolutely no good to think about JC right now, he realized, and then turned slightly to start up a conversation with Joey about something.

But Joey was already rising to his feet, a warm, welcoming smile on his face, his eyes fixed on a tiny woman in a long fur coat who was wearing almost frighteningly high-heeled boots.

"Astrid!" Joey said happily, and lunged forward a bit to envelop her in a hug. In return, she tilted her head back, laughed, and kissed him on each cheek.

"It's fabulous to see you, darling," Astrid said, and Justin stood up as well, nervousness mounting in him as he noticed the very expensive leather bag she carried, the smooth, sleek shine of her perfectly bobbed jet black hair, the large, dark sunglasses she had on. This was obviously someone to be reckoned with.

"This is my colleague Justin, one of Phoenix Press's most talented new editors." Joey beamed back and forth between Astrid and Justin, for all the world seeming completely unaware that any tension had ever existed between these two people. "Astrid Biltingham, meet Justin Timberlake."

Justin gave her his warmest, friendliest smile and extended a hand. The glasses Astrid was wearing prevented him from reading her eyes, but she did curl her dark red lips into something resembling a smile and briefly placed her gloved hand in his before moving to a chair. Immediately Joey was behind her, helping her to remove the coat -- it must've cost thousands, Justin thought, partly in amazement and partly in disgust -- and then handing it off to a waiter before gallantly pulling out her chair and helping her to be seated.

The lunch started out with a string of small talk between Astrid and Joey that Justin could only just barely follow: gossip about musicians, about various musical performances they'd both seen, amused, barbed comments about the most recent shows that had opened on Broadway. As he watched Joey, Justin felt a new respect for him. Joey possessed an entire world of knowledge that no one else at Phoenix Press knew anything about, and yet he never once bragged about it, never once tried to draw attention to himself or lord it over others. He was obviously capable of being sophisticated and urbane but seemed to content himself at work with being a loveable, slightly rumpled mascot. It was fascinating, and it made no sense. Justin wanted to watch him forever.

But after the three of them had ordered, Joey deftly moved the conversation into more difficult waters, and Justin quickly went on guard.

"Astrid, we're just so sorry about the misunderstanding regarding your manuscript," Joey said. "When I read it, my very first thought was that we had such potential here, a real opportunity to create something that would reach a large audience. And quite frankly, I still believe that -- I believe it with everything in my heart. This is going to be a very big book,

Astrid, very, very important. And if we handle it right -- well, quite frankly, I'm thinking we've probably got a candidate for the National Book Award."

"Oh, Joey!" Astrid exclaimed, shaking her head, but she also looked flattered.

"And what I do when I get books like that is hand them over to Justin here," Joey continued, nodding and smiling in Justin's direction. "And the reason for that, quite simply, is that no one, and I really do mean no one, at the press is better than Justin is at bringing in books that sell. He's got . . . something -- I can't even define it, but it's just an incredible skill, one I certainly don't have -- that allows him to feel the publishing market in a way few other editors can. So, in giving your book to him, I was as convinced as I could be that he'd do the right thing for it."

"Hmm," Astrid said, and took off her glasses, revealing striking ice-blue eyes that cut right through Justin. "I suppose that makes sense."

"What I'd like for you to do, Astrid, is give Justin another chance," Joey said, his tone so persuasive and coaxing that Justin didn't see how anyone could reject him. "I know, I know -- there's been a go-round about the prose, but I just --"

Here he broke off and looked intently into Astrid's eyes before continuing in a warm, almost intimate tone of voice. "I just want you to help us make this book into the huge success it deserves to be, all right?"

Justin took a deep breath and tried to see his talking points in his mind, and then cautiously said, "I'm very sorry if my suggestion about developmental editing seemed to be a criticism of your prose, Professor Biltingham. That absolutely was not my intent."

"Astrid," the professor said somewhat primly, and Joey smiled encouragingly at Justin.

"What I'd really like for us to do, Astrid, is come up with a way to get a rewrite we're both happy with," Justin ventured, moving on to point two. "And if a developmental editor isn't the way you'd like to do that, then I'd love -- I'd really love to work with you myself on that. I'd love to talk about the press's goals for the book, and about the kind of audience I see it having for us. Would you . . . would that at all interest you?" Justin finished up with one of his most devastating smiles and hoped desperately that she'd go for it.

"Oh, Joey, I don't want to! I don't want to redo everything!" Astrid exclaimed in an almost petulant voice, and Justin stared in astonishment as he watched her sophisticated facade crumble. She sounded almost like a little girl now, and it was more than a little disturbing.

"I know, I know," Joey said, his voice as sympathetic and kind as Justin had ever heard it. "But this is a good thing, a very good thing, and Justin will take good care of you -- really, he will. Won't you, Justin?"

Justin licked his lips, uncertain. "Absolutely," he said in his most earnest, sincere voice. "I promise you, Astrid."

Astrid straightened up in her chair and recovered a bit. "I was serious, young man, when I told you I didn't want to lose the focus of my book."

Justin stared at his napkin for a moment, then took a risk and moved on to point three. "And I was serious when I told you that we need more from those great interviews you found. There's so much there that you can use to show the excitement of that era. We can bring the book alive, Astrid."

She lowered her head for a moment, thinking.

"And this . . . developmental editor," she said, her voice dripping with disdain. "She's worked with other of your authors?"

"Absolutely," Justin said, and proceeded to give her a few choice names that made her eyes widen.

"So she must be good."

"She's very good," Justin said with all the assurance in the world even though he'd never met her. "If you like, we could set up a meeting with her, just the three of us, and talk about some of the things we might do with the manuscript."

"I think that's a great idea!" Joey was so enthusiastic it was almost embarrassing, but it seemed to work on Astrid, who ducked her head a bit, thought for a moment, and then regally told Justin, "Set it up and we'll see how things go."

"Thank you, Astrid," Justin said, and felt the weight of the world slowly lifting from his shoulders as relief spread through him.

"So, we can forget all this nonsense about severing contracts?" Joey congenially asked Astrid. "I'd really, really hate to lose you."

"Phoenix Press has always been good to me," Astrid said, and gave Joey the first real smile Justin had seen from her since she walked into the restaurant. "And the reason for that is you, Joey. And so if you're telling me that Justin's going to help me with this book, then I'm definitely going to stay with you, definitely going to see where this thing goes."

"It'll be an exciting ride, I promise you," Justin said absolutely honestly, and then caught Joey's eye and tried to smile his thanks.

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The cab door closed behind them, and Justin slumped against the seat and heaved a huge sigh of relief. He felt like he hadn't drawn a full breath in the last day and a half.

"Nicely, nicely done, Justin," Joey said with satisfaction, and when Justin glanced over Joey was beaming at him.

"Me?" Justin asked incredulously. "Joey, honestly. I wouldn't have gotten anywhere with that woman. I'm amazed at the way you handled her. What a . . ." he censored himself at the last

minute, "Uh, what a challenging sort of person she is."

"She's an arrogant, condescending, snotfuck academic," Joey agreed cheerfully, surprising Justin into a snort of laughter. "But she has reason to be -- I mean, I know she was awful to you, but she does write good musicology books, and she's worth cultivating." He turned his grin back to Justin. "And I think now that she's met you, she likes you. I knew the suit would help."

Justin rolled his eyes. "I think she'll put up with me because of you," Justin corrected, and his own grin split his face. "And I'm so incredibly relieved, Joey. The email, and then JC showing up in my office -- I was kind of freaking out. If you hadn't stepped in, I don't know what I would've done. Thank you so, so much."

"Oh, hey, it was nothing, Justin. You're the one who did all the work," Joey said serenely. "Do you want to take the news to that Chasez asshole when we get back? Or is he even around today?"

"Yes. Yes he is," Justin said immediately, and then cleared his throat and feigned interest in something outside his window as he fought back a blush. It wasn't that he was paying such close attention -- JC's movements in and around the press were a matter of common knowledge. It was pure chance that Justin had happened to see him earlier in the day, conducting a meeting in the conference room on the executive level. Justin had gone upstairs to see if their kitchen had any Diet Pepsi -- it wasn't like he'd made a special trip or anything, he reminded himself. He'd just happened to notice the meeting, and the fact that JC had been wearing a very, very handsome and perfectly fitted suit, but not one of the devastating custom Italian suits that usually meant he had meetings outside the press.

"Well, you should take Mr. Moneybags the good news when we get back," Joey said generously.

Justin chewed his lip. "Oh, no, Joey I think it would be better -- more appropriate -- for you to do that," Justin began almost desperately, but Joey shook his head with a smile as the cab slowed and pulled to the curb in front of their building.

"Naw, I'm sure he'd rather hear it from someone else," Joey said wryly. "He and I -- well, I really haven't figured out how to communicate with that guy yet. Besides, you're the one who had all the stress and drama, and had to do all the work. You should be the one to collect the congratulations," he said as they started into the building. "That is, if that asshole sees fit to hand any out."

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It was really ridiculous to have such a huge office with so little in it, Justin thought with that odd mixture of fascination and resentment that he always felt when he had to deal with JC. JC's assistant had been on the phone but he'd smiled and nodded that Justin could go right in, and now he was hesitating in the doorway, facing JC across what seemed like half a mile of pristine, white carpet. The previous director had had this office absolutely crammed with huge, heavy pieces of furniture and bookcases; it had seemed cluttered and dark but it had also been welcoming.

Now it looked -- well, different. Not necessarily better or worse, just very different. With all the blinds open the room was almost too bright, even though the day was cloudy and gray. The furniture was all clean, polished glass and light-colored metal, and everything about it, including the man who sat behind the desk, looked sleek, efficient and very, very rich.

Justin cleared his throat and tapped politely on the open door, and JC impatiently motioned him in. He looked tense and focused, his brows drawn together over sharp blue eyes, his voice clipped and terse as he spoke into his cordless headset. The top of the desk was scattered with complicated and official-looking papers. JC looked very busy and very important, and Justin coming in to toot his own horn over the saving of a single grumpy author suddenly seemed like the height of frivolity.

But it was too late to make an escape now; JC had pulled the headset from his head and fixed Justin with a remote and politely inquiring look as he scraped his free hand through his loose curls. Justin blinked hard and forced himself to speak.

"Yes, so, Joey and I had lunch with Astrid Biltingham about her manuscript . . ." and in as concise and succinct a fashion as possible, Justin relayed the events of the afternoon to an inscrutable JC. He faltered once when he made the mistake of making direct eye contact -- the blue of JC's eyes, the intent way he focused on Justin while he spoke flustered him so much that he completely lost track of what he was saying, and he pulled his eyes desperately away before he trailed off into complete incoherency. Justin stared past JC’s left shoulder and zoomed in on a small spot on the otherwise clean window while he finished what he had to say.

There was a brief silence. "Okay," JC said slowly. "If I understand you correctly, you're telling me that she's agreed to work with your developmental editor, and you have confidence that the finished product will meet our requirements for publishing."

"Yes," Justin said steadily. Was that spot on the window on the inside or the outside? Could glass that thick actually chip? JC still seemed to be examining him closely; Justin felt his heartbeat steadily accelerate and his hands begin to sweat. He sank his teeth into the inside of his lip and forced himself to concentrate.

"Well then," JC said with a deceptive mildness that made Justin tense. "I'm glad that this situation has been taken care of. And if it turns out the way you say it will, then the outrageous lunch expense voucher I just received notice of will be worth it."

“Oh, yes, that sushi place,” Justin said a little hoarsely, and cleared his throat. Again. “I’m sorry about that -- Joey knew that it was her favorite place, and he thought taking her there might help soften her up.”

“Hmm,” JC said non-committally, standing up to face Justin across the desk and blocking his view of the spot on the window. He turned to look curiously over his shoulder at whatever Justin was staring at, and Justin looked away, fast. “Was there anything else?”

Justin was already backing up, heading for the doorway that loomed like a refuge in this pressure-cooker of an office. “No,” he said with relief. “Not at all. Unless there’s anything else you want to know?”

JC watched him closely, those full, soft lips curving just the slightest amount as he watched Justin slide toward the exit. “Not right now,” he said quietly. “But don't worry. When I do, you'll be the first to know.”

February

February

The morning sun was obscenely bright as it beamed into Justin’s small bedroom, and he whimpered pitifully as he burrowed under his covers. At first it seemed that his entire body was in agony; as he slowly awoke he realized that the pain was localized to a ferocious pounding in his head and a queasiness in his stomach. Even the slightest movement caused considerable torment and threatening illness. Justin moaned again, helplessly, and tried to go back to sleep.

And of course he couldn’t, even with the mother of all hangovers making him wish he was dead. Slowly, sluggishly, his body began to make its demands. He needed to use the bathroom, he needed to get some water and aspirin in him and he needed -- sweet Jesus, he needed to get sick.

Half an hour later Justin shuffled unsteadily to his kitchen and filled his largest glass with watered-down 7-up. He sat down on his couch and squinted in misery at his cheerful and bright living room. The pain in his head had, if anything, gotten worse. His brain felt woozy and stuffed with cotton; he couldn’t form a coherent thought to save his life. Thank god it was Sunday.

Not that he didn’t have to work, he thought with some dismay as he eased himself down on the couch and waited tensely for the room to stop spinning. He’d intended to spend some quality time preparing for the nonfiction editorial meeting on Monday morning, but if he didn’t start feeling better, and soon, that was going to be impossible.

He’d thought he’d get his preparation done yesterday, but Joey had stopped by his office at the end of last week with a casual invitation to his house on Saturday. "It’s just a little thing for my birthday," Joey had explained with a grin. "I’m not really into mixing business with my personal life, but I’d like to have you meet my family."

Justin had similar feelings about keeping his personal life private and separate from his professional life, but he honestly liked Joey, who’d already taught him so much and had never been anything but kind to him. And he hadn’t told Joey this, but his own birthday followed Joey’s by just a few days, and with Lance out of town Justin had been feeling a little sorry for himself, and lonely enough to accept.

So early on Saturday afternoon he’d closed his laptop and straightened his files and made his way out to Brooklyn, where Joey lived in a small house with his wife and young daughter. Once there he’d frowned at Joey’s directions in confusion -- there was no possible way that the huge party spilling out of the house and onto the steps and sidewalk, despite the freezing weather, could be termed "a little thing."

He'd found Joey in the very thick of a huge group in the living room, where he'd been welcomed like a long-lost and desperately missed friend. Joey had slung an arm around his neck and taken him through the small house, each room overflowing with laughing, chattering people of all ages. He was introduced as "my good friend Justin, we work together," and his hand was shaken, his shoulder slapped, and his cheek kissed by a simply staggering number of friendly people. He'd met Joey's wife, a short woman with bright, laughing eyes who'd "heard so many wonderful things!" about him, and Joey's daughter, who was possibly the sweetest toddler he'd met outside of his own family. Joey's brother had greeted him like family and handed him a crystal glass of dark, sweet liquid that he was made to understand was some sort of secret and revered family recipe for banana-fig Grappa.

And it had possibly been some sort of magic glass, Justin thought ruefully, because it never, ever seemed to empty.

But oh, he'd had such a good time. Music had been playing in the living room, almost drowned out by the noise of dozens of different conversations. The dining room had two long tables loaded with food, and there were three aluminum kegs of beer nestled in the snow just outside the back door. Children had dashed in and out of rooms, people laughed and talked and danced, and every one of them made Justin feel welcome. By late afternoon he'd felt like he'd known these people forever. He hadn't been this happy in a long time.

Then darkness had fallen and Kelly had come in bearing a gigantic cake blazing with candles. He'd been shocked to see "Happy Birthday to Joey and Justin!!" written in two different colors of bright icing, and had looked across the room to see Joey grinning happily at him.

"I snooped through your calendar!!" he'd shouted in response to Justin's expression of confusion and surprise. Everyone in the room started to sing Happy Birthday, and as Joey had made his way over to him to wrap an affectionate arm around his shoulder, Justin had been embarrassingly choked up at their kindness.

There had been toast after toast with the amazing Grappa. The music continued, with the stereo drowned out by people setting up actual instruments the corner of the living room. Three of Joey's cousins had taught Justin every Italian drinking song they could remember. People with small children had simply put them to bed upstairs and rejoined the party, and it had been very, very late by the time Justin located his coat and announced his intention to head home. It had been another two hours before he'd finally dragged himself away amid hugs and kisses and promises to visit again soon.

The ride home had been a slow-motion horror movie ride in the back of a taxi driven by one of Joey's many, many cousins. By the time Justin had staggered into his building it had been the wee hours of the morning, and he could barely negotiate the stairs. It had taken him four tries just to get his apartment door unlocked.

Grappa, he thought darkly and suppressed a painful wince. It had been so delicious, rich and exotic, but in retrospect he thought it might have been the strongest alcohol he'd ever poured down his throat. And he'd poured a whole bunch of it down his throat, he thought miserably. He was, quite simply, lucky to be alive today.

He finished his drink and set the glass down carefully on the living room table beside his laptop and work folders. He'd start preparing for that meeting soon, he thought as he laid back down and pulled the corner of his afghan over his throbbing head. Just as soon as he was certain that he was going to live.

Justin didn't know how much time had gone by when his phone rang. It was a horrible, shrieking invasion, sharp and shrill and making him moan in agony. He grabbed the receiver just to make the noise stop, and grunted a pained "h'lo" into the receiver as he collapsed back into the orange cushions.

"Justin!" Joey's voice was unbelievably cheerful, making a mockery of Justin's anguish. "How are you today? Kel said I should give you a call and make sure you got home okay."

"Please," Justin said feebly. "Please, Joey. Stop shouting at me."

"What? Oh! Oh," Joey said, and he was laughing, that bastard. "Kelly!" he shouted, making Justin wince. "Kelly! You were right! Hey, man," Joey continued, still laughing and not bothering to lower his voice, even a little bit. "Kelly said she saw you with some of Papa Joe's Grappa. Dude, you're lucky to be still standing."

"Yes. Except for the part where I'm totally not standing," Justin said quietly, and Joey stopped laughing, although he still sounded far too gleefully amused.

"Aww, Justin. Someone should've warned you, man. That stuff is lethal unless you're raised on it." He started laughing again, and Justin closed his eyes and cursed him.

Joey was still laughing when Kelly wrestled the telephone receiver from him. "Justin?" she said, her voice sweet and kind. "Justin, give me your address. I'll send something over that will help you out."

"I think it's too late for that," Justin said forlornly, and Kelly made a sympathetic noise that did, in fact, comfort him greatly. At least it made him feel better enough to remember his manners and string together a thank you for the invitation, the party, the cake, and for making him feel so welcome. She countered with another invitation to dinner: "just the four of us this time, and no Grappa, I promise," which he accepted with pleasure. She was so nice, he marveled as he hung up his phone. How on earth had a nice woman like Kelly gotten mixed up with Joey's evil, Grappa-pushing family?

It wasn't an hour later that Justin's intercom buzzed. It was another of Joey's uncles, a middle-aged man Justin vaguely remembered meeting the previous day. They'd had a spirited discussion about pro basketball and somewhere in the back of Justin's mind he thought that perhaps he'd agreed to join some pick-up basketball league. Mario didn't stay long. He presented Justin with a grocery bag, a huge grin, a sly joke about Grappa and its effect on wonder-bread white boys, and a slap on the shoulder that had almost knocked Justin to the floor. Then he reminded Justin about the basketball league before sketching a wave and jogging back down the stairs.

Inside the bag Justin found a large container of still-warm, cooked pasta with a note that said "Eat with lemon juice -- no sauce!!!!" There were also two fresh lemons, and another

container of chilled liquid that Justin squinted at with alarm. It was sort of brown and sort of red, and had a greasy, congealed consistency that made his stomach churn in warning. The note on this said "Papa Joe's Grappa Cure -- close eyes, hold nose and drink *all* before eating pasta."

Justin found that he was smiling. It might look disgusting, Justin thought ruefully as he set the containers out on his counter and fetched a plate, but he was desperate for something to relieve the misery of this hangover, and he had so much work to do today. Maybe it was one of those fabled, home-made miracle cures; at the very least, it was an incredibly kind gesture. Twenty-four hours ago he'd been a complete stranger to everyone except Joey, and now they were sending him care packages.

Justin opened the container and prepared to hold his nose. He was wary, but it seemed he was in the hands of true professionals here -- and god knew nothing he ingested could make him feel worse then he already did. Joey and his family might be evil, he thought with amusement, but they certainly knew how to make a stranger feel welcome.

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On Monday morning Justin walked into the conference room ten minutes early, settled into his seat, and reached for the stack of notes he'd been diligently working on since the weekend. The nonfiction division of the acquisitions department was about to meet to narrow down its contributions to the fall list, and after the talking-to JC had given them about their lists in general, everyone was anxious and a little frazzled. Justin had thought seriously and carefully about how he might present the several projects he had at varying stages of completion. He wanted desperately to make them sound fantastic and interesting to his colleagues, to do right by his authors and keep their books on the press's list. Justin took in a deep breath and sighed. He had a feeling it wasn't going to be easy.

A few history people wandered in next, and Justin nodded politely at each of them until Nick Carter, swaggering and confident and with his notes in a fancy colored folder, caught Justin's eye and smirked. Nick had been somewhat unpleasant to Justin at meetings in the past, and so Justin narrowed his eyes just a fraction before saying, "Hey, Carter," and then returning to his notes.

Just before 10:00, Elise Martin, who, as the senior acquisitions editor in the house would be leading the meeting, entered the room, her face drawn and tense. She'd no doubt been feeling even more pressure than the rest of them: Justin had more than once in the past couple of weeks seen JC moving in and out of her office, seen the two of them with their heads bent over what could only be early projections for the fall list.

"All right," Elise said, smiling wanly at them. "I wanted to let you all know that JC is going to be sitting in on this meeting, so we'll begin as soon as he gets here."

Justin glanced quickly at his colleagues, taking in raised eyebrows and expressions of disbelief, and then watched them disappear just as quickly as JC entered the room.

"Elise," JC cordially said, his head bent as he studied some notes, and then made his way to a chair across the table from Justin. Justin carefully looked down, wanting to seem completely

preoccupied, but it was next to impossible not to notice how gracefully JC sank into his chair, how elegant his hands were as he flipped through his notes, and how clean and sharp the scent of his cologne was.

Elise smiled and greeted JC, but she looked fairly uncomfortable, and Justin felt almost as bad for her as he did for himself.

"Would you like to say anything before we get started, JC?" Elise diplomatically asked, and for a moment the room was filled with tension as JC, who apparently hadn't heard her, took out what had to be a very, very expensive pen, uncapped it, then began emphatically crossing things out on the page before him. In alarm, Justin strained to see what he was doing -- what if that were the list? What if JC were drawing lines right through the middle of Justin's books? -- but there was no way to do it without leaning halfway across the table, and he figured that JC probably wouldn't like that.

"No, but thank you," JC finally said in a calm, measured voice as he finished writing, and then raised his head to Elise and gave her a small, gracious smile. "The floor is yours."

"All right." Elise swallowed hard as JC apparently ignored them all again, focusing once more on his notes, and then regained her composure. "What I'm looking for from you all is a sense of the way you see your individual lists taking shape, and I want you to highlight your most promising titles for the fall. So, who'd like to start?"

Whether or not JC intended it, and Justin was fairly certain that he did, JC's presence was intimidating, and so instead of speaking up, everyone looked anxiously back and forth from him to Elise. Elise frowned in displeasure and waited it out.

Just as Justin feared that the silence would become interminable, JC shifted slightly in his chair and put his pen down. "Maybe we could start with the music department," he said lightly and Elise nodded, then looked around the table with a slight frown on her face.

"Uh, Justin, Joey's coming, right?" she said softly, and Justin felt his heart sink as he watched JC methodically scan the room, his mouth tightening in displeasure.

"He'll be here in just a minute." Justin spoke with authority even though he had no idea whether that was correct, then very nearly sagged in relief as Joey bustled into the room, his tie loosened and messy, his jacket rumpled, and his shirttails partly hanging out.

"Good morning, everyone," he said distractedly as he took a seat.

JC leaned back in his chair and looked steadily in Joey's direction, his eyes cool and unwelcoming. Justin had never been so glad that he wasn't Joey.

"Welcome, Joey." Elise waited a moment for him to settle in his chair. "Why don't you start us off?"

"Yeah, um, great," Joey said, and as Justin watched JC slowly raise his eyebrows in disbelief, Justin also realized that Joey had come completely unprepared -- he had no paper with him and nothing to write with. And he apparently hadn't thought through what he was going to

say, either, because a long silence ensued while he placidly regarded a spot on the wall behind Elise's head.

When JC began to slowly run his fingertips back and forth over the edge of the table, Justin could practically see the tension and annoyance slowly gathering in him. A vague sense of panic filled Justin, and his mind worked almost manically. He had to fix this somehow, had to get rid of the uneasiness filling the room.

"Um, Joey and I talked this over and it's actually -- I'll be the one to speak for us on this."

The disapproval on JC's face was now perfectly unconcealed as he lifted his head to look slowly from Joey to Justin to Elise.

"All right, then," Elise quickly said just as JC opened his mouth. "Speak to us, Justin."

Tamping down his own rising sense of annoyance and incredulity -- what on earth was Joey thinking? -- Justin took a deep breath and did Joey's job for him, giving a general outline of the music department's fall list, speaking in broad terms about the interaction between trade books and more serious volumes, arguing that the popular books would in the end fund the more esoteric ones, and that the balance struck could only be helpful to the press. Judging from the small nod of approval Elise gave him, he thought he'd spoken convincingly and well, but when he looked across the table and caught the politely skeptical look on JC's face, he wasn't quite so sure.

Elise glanced expectantly at Joey, frowning when he shook his head at her, then looked almost apologetically back at Justin. "Tell us which scholarly volumes your trade books are going to help fund, Justin, and give us a sense of why that has to happen."

Justin tried to catch Joey's eye, but he was staring out the window. Nick Carter was hardly able to contain himself, and he treated Justin to a wide, malicious grin.

Fuck. "Well, as everyone here knows, Joey can probably speak better to that," Justin said, fervently hoping that Joey would take the cue. There was no way he could talk about Joey's books, and Joey knew it.

Finally, Joey came back from whatever zone he'd been in, looked around the table, and became once more the Joey that Justin knew and respected, speaking enthusiastically and eloquently about several manuscripts on, well, really arcane subjects, but the passion he spoke with more than redeemed him, Justin thought.

When Joey had finished, JC bent his head and began writing in his notebook again, the entire room silent save for his quiet, decisive pen strokes. Justin stared in uneasy fascination at JC, deeply curious about what he was thinking, and then became entranced by the quick yet controlled movements of his pen, the gently curling waves of his hair. He was so lost in contemplation that he did not think to lower his eyes when JC put his pen down, or when he slowly looked up, so it was not until JC's clear, inscrutable gaze meet his own that Justin realized that he'd been caught staring. Abashed, he quickly looked away and pretended to be focusing on the meeting even as his cheeks began to redden.

" -- price sheets for us, Joey?" Elise was saying.

"I, uh -- I don't have them with me just at the moment, but I can get them to you after the meeting." Joey sounded a little uncomfortable.

"You didn't get my e-mail about bringing price sheets to the meeting?" Elise carefully asked, and Justin knew at once that she was annoyed.

"Seriously, Elise, I meant to -- it's just --" Joey sighed almost theatrically. "It's been a hell of a morning."

"But Joey, that e-mail went out --" Elise began, then stopped midsentence as JC caught her eye.

"Would you mind if I said something, Elise?" he politely asked, and immediately all eyes in the room were on him.

"Absolutely not," Elise automatically replied. For a split second, Justin wondered how she felt about having JC take over her meeting, but when JC began to speak, all other thoughts left his mind.

"You're probably getting tired of hearing me say this, but this press is running a huge deficit," JC said in a low voice. "And when that happens to a company, it has to change its practices -- either that, or it goes out of business. Now, I probably don't like change any more than the rest of you, but this is a fact we can't ignore: unless we change how we bring books into Phoenix Press, this business will fail." He looked slowly around the room, taking in one stricken face after another, and then continued in the same quiet, devastating tone.

"The best way acquisitions can help in this regard is by making sure that the books you're bringing in are going to break even -- but without price sheets, we can't determine that." JC was hardly looking at Joey at all now, but Joey was still red-faced and miserable.

"So from here on out, I'm going to make this mandatory: if you want to pitch a book to the rest of this press, you have to have price sheets done. Does everyone understand that?"

When several people nodded, JC slowly eased back into his chair. "Thank you, Elise," he said, and then let silence descend on the room again.

The atmosphere in the room was so very deadly that for the second time in fifteen minutes, Justin was compelled to speak, to act, to do anything in the world he could to cancel out the horrible feeling JC had created.

"We do have numbers for some of our books, Elise," he said, carefully avoiding use of the word "my" and trying desperately not to flush as he felt JC's eyes settle on him. "Would it be all right if I took us through those?"

"That would be lovely, Justin," Elise said, her voice full of relief, and so Justin took a deep breath and then began to present his own titles, talking first about a new series he was

initiating on the influence of jazz music on popular music, then mentioning a few specific biographies and histories he wanted to pursue.

As Justin handed out copies of the price sheets he'd made, JC placed his on the table in front of him and then leaned back almost lazily, his elbow balanced perfectly on the arm of his chair, resting his chin in his hand. Justin longed to look closely at him, to gauge his reaction, but there was no way to do it without being painfully obvious. And besides, Justin had promised himself earlier that he was not going to let JC Chasez fluster him, was not going to act like an idiot in front of him yet again. Fortunately, he managed to keep it together, got through exactly what he wanted to say and then exhaled in relief.

Elise gave Justin a small, supportive smile. "From a financial standpoint, it looks like all of these will be successful -- well done, Justin. Now, does anyone have any content-based questions?"

Justin heard feet shuffling under the table and saw one or two people riffling through their notes, but no one spoke.

Elise waited for as long as she could, and then said, "I guess I'll take that as a no, so why don't we move on to--"

"Elise, I'm sorry, but may I interrupt again?" JC asked, and Justin anxiously gripped the arms of his chair. Was JC going to ruin everything the music department tried to do today?

"Go right ahead," Elise said, perhaps a little less politely than she'd welcomed the first intrusion but still well within the bounds of etiquette.

"I realize that my presence could be inhibiting some of you, but I'm afraid you all seem a bit passive," JC finished. "Is that typical for this meeting?"

Justin stared hard at JC and tried not to get angry.

"I don't think so, no," he quietly said, even though Elise was giving him a clear warning look, and then calmly added, "What do you think people should be asking me?" and struggled not to wince as JC narrowed his eyes.

"Well, for one thing, I'd want to discuss the fact that some of the books you're talking about sound pretty familiar," JC said in a low tone, "and I'd imagine further that someone might question the relevance of an entire series about jazz and popular culture when the more dominant and interesting musical influence at present seems to be hip hop music."

Justin bit his lip and saw red. "I wouldn't exactly agree with that, JC." JC had told them that they could use his first name, and dammit if he wasn't going to do it before he lost his nerve. "It seems to me that jazz has influenced a lot of hip hop artists, particularly when it comes to things like improvisation and sampling, and I really -- it'll be a good series. I've got lots of great proposals and lots of great authors and I feel very confident about it."

"Hm," JC said, obviously unconvinced, but he didn't criticize again, either; he just lowered his head to his notes yet again.

"Any more questions for Justin?" Elise asked, her voice now more than a little sympathetic.

Nick Carter leaned forward, opened his mouth, and then looked as if he thought better of it and heaved a huge sigh. Theatrics, all of it, and Justin could not help but glare at him.

"Out with it, Nick," Elise tiredly said, and Justin clenched his jaw and waited.

"Well, I just think -- well. JC mentioned the repetitive nature of Justin's list, and I guess -- I guess I wanted to kind of weigh in on that too," Nick said. "To be honest, I really don't see the reason for the Mort Atcheson biography Justin just pitched. The market's too crowded for yet another Phoenix Press book about bluegrass artists."

"I fail to see how this book in any substantive way repeats previous titles we've done," Justin immediately replied. "Mort Atcheson was unique in several respects: he was the first to pioneer many techniques that producers still rely on today, in all genres of music, and the artists he cultivated were --"

"You know, I think part of this has to do with the fact that you're so new here, and part of it might be that you're just not familiar enough with our list yet." Nick's voice was infuriating, condescending, and Justin felt a hard, angry pit form in the center of his stomach as he listened. "But this press has already published a biography of Atcheson -- in 1998, I believe -- and from what I recall, the sales on it were not all that stellar."

"Yes, I think I remember that. What about this other book?" Elise softly asked Justin, and a sea of words flooded Justin, a tangle of arguments and anger so hopelessly convoluted that he knew he'd never be able to get it out in coherent form. He'd known about the other biography -- a copy of it was sitting on his desk right this moment, in fact -- but somehow, the power to speak intelligently about it had left him.

"He's right -- I mean, he's not right," Justin blurted out, and had to bite the inside of his lip to keep from wincing as he saw JC's mouth turn up in amusement. "What I mean to say is that this book is different, and in significant ways."

"Okay, that's good to hear." Elise looked almost kindly at him. "How?"

"Well, I -- I mean, lots of ways," Justin said, and then felt himself beginning to flush, felt himself losing it altogether in a rush of humiliation, and he knew that he was not going to be able to defend himself right now. "I -- I could speak better to that at our next meeting," he finished miserably and watched a cold smile of triumph spread across Nick Carter's face.

This time JC spoke without asking for permission. "I'm sorry, Justin, but if you can't defend the book off the top of your head, then there must not be a very compelling reason to keep it."

"I'm not -- I just --" Finally, Justin broke off, looking desperately at Elise, wordlessly begging her for help.

"Let's move on," she said, though not unkindly. "I want to hear what the history department's got for us."

As Nick droned on -- horrible, boring stuff, and Justin wasn't even going to give him the satisfaction of attempting to challenge him on it -- Justin sank deeper and deeper into his chair, his face heating up and his stomach churning as all the pieces of the argument he'd wanted to make earlier came unbidden to his head. He'd never choked like that in a meeting before, and it was made even worse by the fact that he'd been pushed aside so easily, that everyone had so quickly lost interest in his contribution. The feeling of dissatisfaction grew steadily, and apart from exchanging a few looks of disbelief with Joey, Justin was utterly unable to participate in the rest of the meeting. All he could do was think of the six million reasons why his biography of Atcheson was important, relevant, and necessary, even -- yes, absolutely necessary for Phoenix Press. Before this day ended, he resolved, he was going to get up and make that case to JC Chasez in a calm, convincing fashion.

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"Thank you, everyone," Elise said, her smile strained, and then signaled to all of them that they could leave the room.

Immediately, JC gathered his notes and rose to his feet, his suit pristine and unwrinkled, his tie perfect, and then moved to the front of the room, sinking gracefully into a crouch and talking quietly to Elise.

Justin stood up with the rest of the people in the conference room, then drew a long, deep breath -- his first in what seemed like hours -- and grimaced. In spite of the fresh flowers at either end of the room and the highly efficient air conditioning system, the conference room now smelled vaguely like a locker room. Too many tense and nervous people, he thought. Not enough air.

"Joey and Justin," Elise's voice was clearly unhappy, and she looked once at JC, who was now standing up, as if for confirmation before continuing. "Stay a moment, please."

It wasn’t a request. Justin peered longingly through the windows lining the walls of the conference room as the rest of his colleagues filed silently down the hallway. He was starving, having had no idea that the meeting would go so late into the afternoon. He felt hollow and empty and he wanted out, out of this pressure cooker of a room, out of JC’s sight.

Joey caught his eye and gave him a expression of concern, and for a split second, Justin was deeply annoyed. If Joey had been more prepared for this meeting, the two of them probably wouldn't be in this situation.

Against his will, Justin’s eyes cut toward JC again, skimming over the dark, curly hair, the sharp cheekbones, the smooth and full lips. He was so handsome, so fucking incredibly handsome, but Justin reminded himself that it was just a shell. JC wasn’t simply projecting a business-like and chilly facade -- he was cold and calculating to the core.

For the millionth time since he'd first seen JC at the press, Justin pushed away the insidious memory of those warm and full lips on his own, drifting down his neck and chest, nibbling on his belly as Justin had squirmed. As JC lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck, Justin determinedly squashed the memory of the way those fingers had skimmed over his body,

making it hum with tension, stroking and soothing and then coaxing until Justin's voice had been breathless with need, until he'd opened up and begged . . .

JC glanced up suddenly and Justin froze, hoping to god that he wasn't flushed, that nothing of what he'd been thinking was showing on his face. JC's eyes were direct and hard: there was no softness there, no humor, nothing of the man who had taken Justin to bed in a high rise Manhattan apartment one night and driven him wild.

And kicked him out at sunrise the next morning, Justin reminded himself also for the millionth time. It would not do to forget that part.

Maybe that was good, Justin reflected as the last people trickled out of the conference room and the heavy door closed behind them, leaving the room in utter silence. Another few meetings like this and he should be completely incapable of conjuring up any thought of JC that didn't make him wince in discomfort or tremble with panic.

"Elise, if you don't mind, I'd like to do the talking here," JC said, looking first at Joey, then at Justin, his eyes bright and sharp.

"By all means, go ahead," Elise said, and now she was the one refusing to make eye contact.

JC looked hard at Joey and Justin, then spoke in a low, intense voice. "When you attend meetings at this press, I expect you to come on time and to come prepared. Do you understand me?"

"Uh, yeah, look. I'm really sorry about that," Joey began. "I had to drop my daughter off at daycare, and I --"

"I'm sure we're all very busy," JC interrupted, and Justin flushed with sympathy for Joey. "But I need you to be prepared for meetings. Again, is that clear?"

"Crystal clear." Obviously embarrassed and angry, Joey quietly added, "Will that be all?"

JC nodded, then turned to Elise, wordlessly dismissing them. "I need to talk to you about the contract for the Alton book," he told her. "Do you have time this afternoon?"

As Elise and JC murmured to each other, Joey hurried out of the room, leaving Justin standing there in confusion and looking at JC and Elise.

Finally, Elise and JC finished their conversation. Elise gave Justin one more sympathetic look as she left as well, leaving Justin and JC alone in the silent room.

JC raised his eyebrows and waited for Justin to speak. "Yes?"

"Uh, look," Justin finally said, his voice low and shaking a bit. "That -- what you saw from Joey today? That's not usually like him, all right? I just wanted you to know that."

JC was silent for so long that Justin almost shivered. "Your boss can speak for himself, Justin."

"I know, but I just --" Justin began, then broke off in distress. "He's a really great guy, really good for the press, and if you'll just be patient with him, I'm sure you'll see really soon that -- "

JC sighed and glanced at his watch, slowly starting to head for the door, toward Justin. "Your job is to talk to me about your work, not about your colleagues, your feelings, or your impressions of various meetings. If I want your opinion on other matters, I'll ask you for it, but until then, I'm going to have to ask you not to bother me. Is that clear?"

JC paused right in front of him, and Justin wanted to die.

"Yes. Sorry," he got out.

JC nodded and continued moving toward the door. "All right, that's all. Thank you."

"Wait, wait -- I -- there's something else I'd like to talk to you about." Justin paused and took a deep breath, privately amazed at how steady his voice was, especially when JC slowed down and turned around, eyes intent on him. "Something work-related. Uh, I'd like to go over that book of mine again, the Atcheson biography."

To Justin's surprise, JC actually smiled. "Why does that not surprise me?"

Justin tried to look confident. "It's just -- I hate that I didn't get to argue properly for it, and I really want the chance to try again."

"You should speak to Elise about that."

Justin coughed. "I'll talk to her as well, but I think we both know that at this point, you're the person making the decisions around here."

JC looked steadily at him. "Even supposing that's true, why should I give you this chance?"

Justin spoke as quickly and convincingly as he could. "Because if you'd just listen to me, you'd see that this is going to be an important book, and that this press needs it, really needs it. And also -- it isn't at all like that other biography. Nick Carter -- well, he really misrepresented that when he spoke."

"The time to have said that was when you had the floor, Justin." JC was headed for the door again, and Justin clenched his jaw, then took a deep breath. If he let JC walk out of this room right now, he would be killing his book.

"I couldn't do it then because I lost my train of thought," Justin confessed, his face tinging red. "And that doesn't happen to me very often -- believe me, you'll see that soon enough. But for the sake of this book -- not for my pride, and not because of stupid rivalries -- I want a chance to speak to you about it, because I seriously think it'll be good for this press. Very good."

JC lifted an eyebrow and waited.

"So, uh. If you've got some time now, maybe," Justin trailed off nervously.

"Right now, I'm going to lunch," JC said.

"Do you think --" Justin began, then stopped himself.

"If you want to ask me something, then do it," JC said, and Justin felt a wave of excitement and astonishment roll over him.

"Could we continue this discussion over lunch?" He'd said it as plainly and as firmly as he could, and JC had better -- he had better --

"Fine. Meet me in my office in ten minutes." JC was now at the door, slowly pushing it open. "Oh, and one more thing," he added, pausing and looking back at him. "This will be your last chance to talk about this book, so you'd better be ready."

"I will be. I can be. You won't -- okay," Justin said to JC's back, and lunged into action, grabbing his portfolio, scrabbling together his pens, his folders, his notes.

Lunch, Justin thought as he headed to his office. Lunch with JC. A working lunch, but lunch. Outside the office. Just the two of them. His heart galloped in his chest and he ran a shaking hand over his head. He needed to splash water on his face, gather his thoughts, prepare for a one-on-one meeting, and find a way to compose himself. And he only had ten minutes.

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"Okay," Justin said as the waitress moved away from them, and then put the Mort Atcheson book Nick Carter had been talking about on the table. "This is pretty much a standard biography. The author talked to all the right people, looked at all the right articles, and came up with a fairly conventional argument about Atcheson's life."

Justin looked nervously at JC, who at the very best was only halfway listening. He'd been distracted and impatient since they'd come in, checking phone messages and looking restlessly around the room, and Justin was keenly aware that he was not keeping his attention in the way he needed to.

"Um." For a split second, Justin struggled, on the verge of panic -- he was boring JC and he was going to blow this -- but he overcame the weakness and then pushed on. This was an important book. He cared about this book. He was going to sell this book to JC.

"But, see, the thing is, this author didn't have access to all the archival materials on Atcheson," he said, his voice low and steady, too low for JC to hear without inclining his head and leaning across the table a little bit, which he did. "And he also -- this guy's a historian, okay, and he writes like a historian -- which, I don't mean to be disrespectful of the discipline or anything, but historians either have it or they don't when it comes to writing. And this guy doesn't -- he just doesn't. Two of the reviews I looked up called this book informative but lackluster, and it's still not even close to selling out its first print run."

JC nodded, then leaned back in his chair. He looked like he was about to say something sharp and devastating, so Justin jumped right in again, determined at all costs to keep the floor.

"The book I've got is written by an English professor, someone who's loved bluegrass music all his life. And he's actually even played in a band for a while, so not only can he write, but his passion and understanding for the material really come through. He's able to sketch out this guy's life in a way that makes you really want to know what happens next. I swear, JC -- it's almost like a novel or something -- it's that good."

Here, Justin chanced a small smile at JC, who slowly raised his eyebrows and quirked his mouth. Fuck, he was handsome; fuck he was hot, and if Justin were reading this situation right, he was also starting to pay attention. Energized by the thought, Justin widened his smile a bit.

"Go on," JC said softly, and there was interest in his voice, as well as something rather less suitable, something Justin really, really couldn't allow himself to think about right now. He looked down at the book in front of him to collect his thoughts, and then slowly, carefully, glanced at JC before continuing the pitch.

"And my guy found new documents about Atcheson, did research in archives that the other author didn't know anything about. And so," he went on, his voice low again, as low as he could make it in a public place, because now JC was sitting up a little more, JC was leaning in a bit, JC was looking even more intently at him, "we have a book that both offers new information and is well written, and I think it'll do really well for us. It's got any number of strengths the other one doesn't."

"I see." JC reached over and picked up the book Justin had been maligning, his hands sliding appreciatively over the jacket and the spine. Justin bit his lower lip as he watched: JC was holding it like a book lover would, taking pleasure in its weight, its heft, the thickness and texture of the pages. Maybe he understood publishing a little better than people were giving him credit for.

"So your book contributes to our knowledge of Atcheson and reads like a novel?" JC asked, his voice deceptively light as he flipped through the book to the photo gallery, his fingers careful and sure on the pages, just like they'd been on -- on --

"Yeah." Justin roughly said, then forced himself to pick up a glass of water and take a long, cool drink. JC knew a thing or two about seduction as well -- he more than anyone should have remembered that. He had to get this thing back on a professional footing, had to regain control.

"I've done a full-blown financial analysis in addition to the price sheet," he said more briskly, bending over to retrieve the folder he'd carefully placed in his messenger bag right before the meeting and then offering it to JC. "And it's viable -- it's very much so. You'll note that the projected earnings for the first year will be --"

JC didn't take the folder. "Will it break even?"

"It'll do even better than that, I think. I mean, if I'm right, this could maybe even --"

"If it's as important a book as you say it is, then I don't care if it makes us money -- as long as it doesn't lose any. And your judgement is that it won't do that, right?" JC spoke seriously and

slowly, and Justin swallowed hard. JC was going to trust him on this. JC was about to take his word for it.

"Yes," Justin finally said. "That's what I think."

"Okay, then," JC said, then put the other book back down and slid it across the table to Justin.

"And it'll appeal to several audiences," Justin continued. "I spoke to some people down in marketing, and they said they could sell it to history buffs and music fans, and that if we could, say, get a review in Rolling Stone or something, it'd have even wider appeal. And so -- "

"Sounds good," JC said, and then looked up and smiled, a brilliant, seductive, absolutely gorgeous smile, at the waitress as she sat a salad down in front of him. Justin watched jealously as she flushed.

"We might even consider releasing it with a CD as well." Justin nodded at the waitress as she gave him his salad, too, then once again became mesmerized by JC's neat, elegant movements as he put a napkin in his lap and reached for his fork. "I know these tie-ins don't always work that well, but in this case, it'd be really cool to do that, because we could use the very same songs this guy is interpreting, and readers would really --"

"Justin, I said okay," JC quietly interrupted, and for a moment Justin stared at him in shock.

"But I --"

"No, really -- stop it," JC said, and then smiled at him. "I'm convinced. Write me a report and put the manuscript on my desk tomorrow afternoon. If it's done well, I'll authorize you to move to the contract stage."

"Photographs," Justin blurted out, unable to believe what he was hearing, unable to feel the triumph he should be feeling, unable to slow down and stop. "There are so many great photographs -- the art department will have a ball with them, and --"

"I mean it, Justin -- no more," JC said softly but seriously, and Justin widened his eyes, sat carefully back in his chair as his heart began to pound.

"It's been a pleasure to see your . . . enthusiasm," JC went on, and now he was -- god. He was just flaunting it. "I think that's one of the things I appreciate most about you."

Justin could do nothing but look deep into JC's eyes and feel a shiver start to roll over his body, a slow, gradual wave of excitement.

"And I'm not going to pretend that I don't enjoy seeing you work so hard, because I do." JC smiled at him again. "But right now, I'd rather see you relax and eat your lunch."

"Yeah. I -- yeah," Justin softly answered, and JC smiled slowly, wickedly at him, and it was unfair -- it was beyond unfair, because what was JC doing? How could he be so cold one minute, and so hot the next, and why was Justin so eminently vulnerable to all of his moods?

His face carefully neutral, Justin gripped the arms of his chair, waited until he was sure his hands weren't going to shake, and then slowly picked up his salad fork and started to eat.

March

March

By the time the lights went on, the machines started up and people began trickling into their offices it was almost 8:00 and JC had been hard at work for more than two hours. It was going to be a very long day, a day that would include meetings with three different departments and careful review of two manuscripts he was determined to have ready for the fall list. In addition there was a lunch meeting involving a pitch from a company purporting to offer outside copyediting services for a significant cost savings, and a dinner meeting with a trio of businessmen regarding the parent corporation's latest European expansion that his grandfather was insisting he keep an eye on. He had to at least make an appearance at a cocktail party his mother was hosting before her favorite charity's annual silent auction. Then, he noted grimly as he scrolled through his appointment calendar, he had two other parties he'd promised to attend, one of them hosted by an old friend from Stanford that he'd been trying unsuccessfully to meet up with for the last six weeks. He sighed deeply. He'd be lucky to be home before dawn and even though the next day was Saturday he would have to get up and do it all over again. It had been years since weekends held any sort of meaning for him.

For a moment his eyes flickered to the bright skyline outside his window, and almost against his will he thought of his house in Connecticut. In just a matter of weeks it would be so beautiful there, he thought a little wistfully, the last of the snow melting and new growth turning the landscape bright green. He hadn't been there since right after Christmas, he recalled, when he'd taken three whole days off after winding up his business in Europe and before starting work at the press. It had been beautiful and utterly peaceful, and for a moment the longing to be there, out of his sterile and amazingly efficient office and at his house, surrounded by trees and quiet, was almost overwhelming.

And it wasn't really that far. Only a couple of hours away, he thought slowly. He could gather up these manuscripts, postpone the meetings, have his assistant cancel his lunch and dinner appointments. He could call his mother from the car and make his excuses; she wouldn't like it, but she probably wouldn't scold him too much. She knew what his schedule had been like lately. His eyes strayed to the chrome clock ticking quietly on his credenza. He could be in Connecticut by lunchtime.

With an effort he jerked his attention back to the manuscript spread in front of him. He couldn't even consider it, he told himself firmly. He had far too much work to do. Plus, it was Friday and traffic would be awful. There would be another time, another weekend, when things weren't so hectic. He stifled the little voice that said things wouldn't ever be less hectic, that the path he'd chosen would rarely, if ever, allow for lazy weekend getaways.

With the ease of long practice JC pushed such thoughts away and focused on the manuscript in front of him until precisely 8:30 and then took a break, stretching in his chair before rising

to get more coffee. He kept his back to the window as he exited his corner office, and reminded himself to close the blinds when he returned. It was far too much of a distraction today.

He strode down the hallway, returning greetings absently, his attention still on the manuscript on his desk. There was something fundamentally wrong with the beginning of the book –- not with the writing, which was exemplary, but with the structure. His brow furrowed. Perhaps if the first three chapters were rearranged to introduce the information in a timeline rather than by the separate accounts of several people . . .

He passed the smaller of the glassed-in conference rooms on his floor, moving fast. A meeting was in progress there and that pleased him. It was promising to see people in early and already working. Perhaps, as he'd hoped, they were starting to accept his way of doing things, perhaps they were beginning to understand that he truly had the press's best interests at heart. People were learning what was expected of them, and they were either rising to the challenge or he was weeding them out. And it was going to be a struggle but he was beginning to feel like he could do it, he could turn this press around and make it profitable, a subsidiary that his family's corporation could be proud of. And it would take people like these, he thought, people who weren't afraid of hard work. He glanced into the conference room as he passed to see who the early birds were, and as he did his entire train of thought derailed and ground to a halt. JC slowed down and stared.

There were six people in the meeting, there were papers spread out on the table and a heated discussion of some sort seemed to be in progress. JC identified book cover comps and various proofs of what appeared to be illustration plates. But his attention was commanded by the person standing at the head of the table and apparently refereeing the discussion.

And of course it was Justin, he thought in exasperation. Lately there was no escape. In fact, Justin had featured prominently in a dream that had woken JC before his alarm that very morning -- a dream of huge blue eyes and a long, elegantly curved back and a full soft mouth and a voice that had whispered and begged. A dream that had left him aching and restless and even more cranky and disoriented than usual upon waking, a dream of such clarity and power that he felt a flush of inappropriate heat just from its memory even as he continued walking down the hallway of his place of business.

Justin was nodding seriously as someone spoke to him, his brow furrowed a bit and his face solemn. He looked earnest and businesslike, and a part of JC approved of the way he gave his full attention to the speaker -- he didn't take notes or even glance down at the artwork being discussed, he kept his beautiful blue eyes focused on the woman speaking. JC watched as he asked a question, nodded at the answer, and then began speaking himself. He was so animated, even his facial expressions were persuasive. He also tended to gesticulate when he talked, JC noted, and barely kept himself from smiling fondly.

Justin was one of the good ones, he thought. He was working hard to bring in promising books, books that brought some balance to the music department's baffling list. And here he was in an early morning meeting, following up on the progress of his books just as JC had told the editors they must do. Justin took his job seriously. JC liked that.

Then Justin sat down at the head of the table as someone else began speaking, and as JC watched he raised his arms and stretched backwards in his chair, the cloth of his shirt pulling enticingly across his torso. And JC felt the bewildering mixture of affection and pride simmer immediately into something darker.

Almost as if he sensed JC's eyes on him, Justin glanced out the glass window of the conference room and froze, his arms still behind his head. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of JC and his lips parted in surprise. The sounds and bustle of the busy hallway seemed to fade away and JC was gradually aware of his own breathing, of the slowly accelerating thud of his heart, and for what seemed like an eternity JC allowed himself to simply stare. Justin seemed to swallow hard but he lifted his chin and didn't glance away. After a long, slow moment Justin blinked rapidly and raised his eyebrows, indicating the meeting and silently inviting JC to join them. His cheeks were red.

JC wrenched his eyes away and continued down the hallway, amazed at himself. He lifted his empty coffee cup to his lips just for something to do.

This absolutely had to stop, JC told himself grimly. Justin wasn't just any gorgeous young man or even the sweet memory of an exceptional one-night stand. As he'd reminded himself sternly in his icy cold shower that very morning, Justin was an employee, and it was impossible to think about him in any other way. They were co-workers who would be thrown together over the course of business for a finite period of time; after this year, JC would never see him again. He'd resolved firmly that he would not think about Justin in that way again, and had put the thought of Justin's handsome face, engaging manner and beautiful, responsive body out of his mind.

He glanced reflexively at his watch and felt rage simmer. He'd kept Justin out of his thoughts for less than three and a half hours.

He'd reached the break room without noticing a single person or thing on his way there, drank a glass of water, and refilled his coffee cup. He would take the long way back to his office.

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The quiet tap at his door came exactly three hours and seventeen minutes later. JC had switched from coffee to soda after 10:30, had worked his way through his issues with the first three chapters of the manuscript, and was currently focusing on the middle section of the book, which was much smoother. He'd also been obliged to take four urgent business calls and one personal one from his younger brother, who wanted to take his latest girlfriend to JC's house in Connecticut for a romantic weekend. JC had said no for the ninth time in the last year; if Tyler wanted to take his girlfriend out he could dip into his own funds and stay at a hotel, and if JC couldn't visit his own house this weekend he didn't want anyone else there either. When he'd hung up the phone he'd closed his blinds against the bright spring day outside his window.

He had not, in the previous three hours and seventeen minutes, thought of Justin Timberlake a single time. But as the tap came again and he spoke permission to enter he wasn't the slightest bit surprised to see Justin ease through his half-open door and move toward him.

JC watched him cross the room, his stride long and casual, his face neutral, eyes watchful. Justin managed to look completely at ease until he stuffed both hands into the pockets of his jeans when he stopped in front of his desk. His eyes were focused over JC's head, at the closed window blinds, and he was chewing slightly on his lower lip.

"Yes, Justin. What is it?" he inquired. He kept his tone low and even and utterly disinterested. In no way did it betray his slight rise in temperature or the not-so-subtle interest his body took in Justin's presence.

"I saw you noticed that meeting I was in this morning," Justin started, and his tone was just as quiet as JC's. "I just wondered, since you didn't join us," he continued, and JC watched with interest as Justin's hands made fists inside his jeans pockets, "if maybe you'd like a report?"

JC raised his eyes to Justin's face and caught a flash of blue as Justin's eyes darted away. He'd been staring at his face, JC realized, and the knowledge made his pulse quicken further. Deliberately he set his pen down and leaned back in his chair as Justin resolutely stared over his head.

"Was this meeting regarding something that I should know about, or that you'd require my input on?" he asked smoothly. "Because if it was, maybe you should've invited me to attend when you set it up."

Justin blinked hard and seemed to force himself to relax. "Not at all," he said, his voice just the slightest bit breathless. "I was talking to the art department and marketing about the Atcheson book," he continued, seeming to steady himself. "The new art director has some really great ideas about a cover, and I just thought, you know, maybe you'd be interested in the book's progress." Again his eyes skittered to JC's face and then away, and JC felt a deep and greedy hunger as he watched Justin's teeth worry his lower lip. "Since you liked the manuscript," he finished.

The Atcheson book, JC thought slowly, staring at Justin as silence descended. The book Justin had argued so earnestly and persuasively for over lunch a few weeks ago. When he'd reviewed the manuscript JC had been pleased to see that his impulse to take a chance on Justin's judgment had been correct. It was a wonderful book: well written, fast-paced and engaging. He anticipated, as Justin obviously did, that it would do well.

Justin's teeth continued to sink into his lip and his blush deepened. JC realized that the silence had gone on too long, but he couldn't deny the pleasure he took in simply looking at Justin. He really was so fucking attractive, he thought ruefully, and stifled a sigh.

"I'd like to know what Chris has planned for the cover design," he finally said, pleased with his calm tone. "But I trust your judgment on this." JC allowed himself a small smile and was ridiculously pleased when Justin returned it, a shy smile that lit up his eyes. Fucking gorgeous, JC thought dimly, and squashed that thought immediately because Justin was speaking again, and he'd pulled his hands out of his pockets and was gesturing in a really charming way.

" . . . food's really good, and I could bring the cover treatments and the design layouts and we could look them over while we ate," he was saying, and the hope and anticipation in his eyes

made JC’s heart squeeze painfully with longing.

Justin trailed off and silence stretched between them again.

"Thank you, but I have a lunch meeting scheduled," JC said politely, and for a moment it was a struggle to remember all the reasons that he must not think about or spend time with Justin as he watched Justin’s face fall. Suddenly he was blinded with rage -- why couldn’t he go to lunch and talk about work things with Justin? JC worked so long and so hard -- why couldn’t he do this one thing that would give him so much pleasure?

Because it wouldn’t be the one thing, he realized with something like despair. He would love to have lunch with Justin, and he’d like to have dinner with him too, and go with him to the movies, or to a baseball game, and take him home and to his bedroom and strip the clothes off of him while he sighed and moaned, and . . .

Jesus, he had to get a grip on himself. Justin was still standing stiffly in front of his desk, and if JC didn’t squash this right now it would only get worse.

Deliberately he dropped his eyes to the work on his desk and picked up his pen. "Send me a report," he said curtly as he picked up his pen. "E-mail is fine; just keep me apprised of the progress and I’ll want to see the final proofs once you and Chris have decided on a design." The words of the manuscript in front of him blurred slightly and he clenched his fingers around his pen as he felt Justin hesitate.

"Was there anything else, Justin?" He would not look up at him, JC told himself fiercely. He would not look at or think about Justin again.

"No," Justin’s voice was very quiet, and as he turned slowly and headed for the office door JC’s eyes were drawn to him against his will. Fury raced through him at the set of Justin’s shoulders beneath his cream-colored button shirt, at his bowed head. Fury at himself for hurting Justin’s feelings, anger at Justin for inviting him to lunch and forcing JC to reject him, rage at the entire ridiculous and impossible situation.

"Hold on," JC said sharply, and Justin stopped a few feet from the doorway, turning slightly toward him. His cheeks were still red. "What on earth are you wearing?" JC continued quietly, and Justin blinked in bewilderment. He looked down at himself as if he couldn’t remember.

"Oh, Joey lets us wear jeans on Fridays," Justin offered tentatively, his eyes wide. "I mean, if we don’t have outside meetings or anything," he continued, and gestured helplessly. "He says it’s good for morale."

JC stared unsmilingly at him until Justin shoved his hands back into his pockets. "What a charming sentiment," he drawled. "But since Joey has no idea who might be walking our halls or meeting with other departments, let me just say that the dress code was instituted for a reason. And Justin," he paused until Justin lifted his eyes from a study of his own tennis shoes to look at JC. "It is never, *ever* casual day at my press. Do you understand me?"

Justin nodded, apparently unable to speak although JC couldn’t tell if it was fury or fear that kept him silent.

"Good," JC said, and it was a dismissal. Justin turned immediately to the door and marched out without looking back, but JC watched his back retreat until it passed out of sight.

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Once in his office, Justin picked up a manuscript someone had placed on his chair and slammed it hard on his desk, taking comfort in the satisfyingly heavy noise it made, the way it made everything else on the desk vibrate. What the hell had he been thinking inviting himself into JC's office to brag about his meeting and then, worse still, asking him to lunch? When was he going to learn to stop courting rejection?

With a heavy sigh, Justin reached for his jacket. If he was going to go home to change his clothes, he'd have to skip lunch, which would suck, because he was already hungry and he hadn't had much more than a granola bar for breakfast.

"Stupid," he said out loud, not sure whether he meant himself or JC's ridiculous rules about formality in the office, then turned around in shock when a voice sounded from the doorway.

"What's stupid?" Chris, the new art director, said, his mouth twisted into a wicked grin.

"Dress codes." Normally Justin wouldn't have been so forthcoming with someone he hadn't known for long, but he and Chris had hit it off since their first meeting, and Justin felt safe to speak freely to him.

Chris flicked eyes over Justin. "You got in trouble for your clothes?"

Justin nodded curtly, then let his own eyes travel from the ragged tee shirt Chris wore to the faded jeans in far, far worse condition than the ones he was wearing, to the scuffed, well-worn sneakers. He frowned.

"Has JC seen you today? Why the hell am I always the one who gets in trouble?"

"Chasez wouldn't dare fuck with me like that," Chris said with absolute confidence, and Justin believed him. "I've known him for far too long."

Now that was interesting. "Known him? How so?"

Chris cocked his head, looked hard at him. "Let's go get lunch and I'll tell you all about it."

"Sorry, I can't," Justin said, shaking his head. "I have to go home and change my clothes."

Chris laughed. "For God's sake, Justin -- don't tell me you actually think he means it. You caught him on a bad day at the wrong time. He's not going to carry it any further."

"I'm really not so sure about that," Justin dubiously said, thinking back to the precise, clipped tone of JC's voice, the disapproving look in his eyes. "He kind of hates me, I think."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Okay, first off, that's just wrong. And second, if he comes after you again about the idiotic dress code, you just tell him Chris said it was okay, all right?"

Justin scowled, because now Chris was making fun of him, and he didn't like that very much. "Fine, then," he said, and shrugged into his jacket. "That's exactly what I'll do."

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"You know, it's kind of interesting he's picking on you at all," Chris said as they pushed through the crowded sidewalk to the deli he'd suggested for lunch. "It's actually pretty unusual for Chasez to notice the people around him, at least on a personal level, so you must've done something to get on his radar."

Justin carefully didn't react to that.

"He's so distant and disapproving all the time," he said. "I'd rather not be on the radar at all if this is how he behaves."

Chris laughed out loud. "Don't take it personally, okay? I mean, to me, it seems that you're doing a fine job, and if he hasn't told you differently, then I'll bet JC thinks the same. It's just -- he's not going to shower you with praise or anything like that. It's not how he works."

"So how does he work?"

"Well, I've never been on the job with him before, but I knew him for years when we were in college. He's just a very structured, very motivated person," Chris told him as if that were enough.

Justin frowned. "That I know. But doesn't he ever have fun? Doesn't he ever, you know, just let loose every now and then?"

"Of course he does, and when he decides it's time to do that? He's as good at it as he is at everything else. Believe me," Chris said with a smirk. "When it came to parties and sex . . . well, let's just say he's had a varied and interesting love life, if you know what I mean."

Again, Justin carefully controlled his facial expression.

"But as far as college went, and as far as his study habits or whatever, he was like a machine, so focused it was scary," Chris continued. "When JC has a purpose or a goal in sight, nothing stops him from getting it."

"It's almost creepy, don't you think?" Justin said, shivering a little, still trying to put thoughts of JC's libido out of his mind.

Chris shrugged. "I don't know. He identifies what he wants and he goes for it. It's not all that strange."

"But if there's no down time -- if he never relaxes or whatever, then that is strange. You can't live like that."

You know about his family, right?"

Justin nodded. "Through the society pages, sure."

"More likely the business pages," Chris said. "The Chasez family has some serious money -- I mean, we're talking billions here. And JC's the heir apparent. He always has been, ever since he was a kid. The weight of the expectations he's under -- man. And I just -- that kind of thing wears at you, you know?"

Justin didn't know, because his own family had never been anything other than kind and supportive, but he nodded nonetheless.

"The one JC's closest to right now is his grandfather, but even he has his moments. Oh, and his grandmother was pretty cool, but she's dead now," Chris said. "She was actually the one who loved Phoenix Press so much -- acquired for them for years, actually. JC used to come work for her in the summers. Did you know that?"

"No -- no, I didn't," Justin said, and felt his cheeks grow a little pink. "He's not exactly, uh, forthcoming."

Chris laughed and pushed Justin a step closer into the deli. "He's really not a bad guy. You have to give it time."

"I'm not sure how much time I have, given that he's firing people left and right," Justin said bitterly, then cringed as he realized that Chris was standing next to him precisely because of that firing.

"Listen -- I don't know a whole lot about what went on before I came to the press, but I'll tell you this much: JC does not fuck people over, and he does not do dumb things. He's one of the smartest people I know, and seriously? If JC thought someone needed to be fired, then I'll bet they pretty much damn well did."

Justin looked away at that, studying the menu, staring blankly at the Coke sign, and holding back his annoyance and indignation as the face of Peter Brumbridge, Phoenix Press's former art director, flashed through his mind.

"These things are never easy, though," Chris carefully said; it was a gesture of reconciliation, and Justin slowly turned around and nodded at him.

"So JC's got pressure from his family, then," he said casually, watching as the woman in front of him ordered a huge corned beef sandwich.

"Absolutely," Chris said. "He's really loyal to them, incredibly dedicated and protective. The things he's done for them -- well. It's pretty insane."

Justin was dying to ask exactly what JC had done, but then the woman in front of him stepped away and he was up to order.

"I'll get it." Justin looked behind in surprise to see Chris dangling a twenty-dollar bill in the air. "What with my awesome new art director salary and all."

"Yeah, and after this, you can go buy yourself some new clothes," Justin said, then took the number the girl working the cash register gave him and headed out into the crowded dining room to find a table.

"So." Justin put down his half-eaten turkey sandwich, wiped his mouth, and looked expectantly at Chris. "What crazy things has JC done for his family?"

"Ah, I get you now. You're looking for blackmail material. And to think I thought you weren't all that bright," Chris teased.

"I, no. I --"

"Relax, relax." Chris laughed, then crumpled up his napkin and sat back in his chair. "Well, first of all, there's the fact that for years now he's been working, what, sixty to eighty hours a week for their corporation, bringing in more and more money each year even though they're already all gazillionaires. And obviously, he likes it, likes making deals and being a corporate shark and all that, but putting in hours like that is a little bit beyond the call of duty, don't you think?

"Yeah." Yet again, Justin was deeply grateful for his own understanding, kind family.

"Probably the dumbest thing I can remember him doing for his family, though, was dating this girl for -- well, just forever. She was some debutante, perfectly groomed to marry into the family, and his parents just loved her."

"Is he still with her? What was her name?" The questions were out before Justin could stop himself, and he hoped to god Chris didn't pick up on the urgency behind his words.

"Hell, no," Chris said with relish. "I mean, she was fine and all, but he just -- the interest wasn't there, if you get what I mean. JC actually prefers . . . a different sort of person."

Now Justin did blush, because Chris looked knowing and sly, and for a split second, he was certain, absolutely certain, that JC had told Chris that they'd slept together. And that thought was very nearly intolerable.

"Oh, hey, I remember -- Her name was Bobbie," Chris said then, tactfully dropping the previous subject. "He actually still sees her from time to time -- I don't think she ever really got over him."

"Hm," Justin said, thinking about the beautiful woman he'd seen JC making promises to at his party.

"So anyway, two years JC spends with her -- *two years*, and it was all because his family liked her. He -- well. He'd do a lot for them."

Justin nodded. "So this press thing, then -- that's also for them?"

"Actually, no." Chris took a huge gulp of soda, then gestured to the uneaten portion of Justin's sandwich. "I paid good money for that. Eat it, all right?"

Justin rolled his eyes and picked up the sandwich while Chris geared up for another talk.

"The press -- well, that was his grandmother. She's the one who really loved it, and she was always kind of the dreamer in the family, not the practical one, not at all concerned with money. From a financial standpoint, you have to know it's ridiculous for JC even to bother with this press. I mean, he could bring in more for Antaeus in a single week in his regular job than he's going to do in an entire year at Phoenix. No -- I think JC's doing this for his grandma, for her memory in some way."

"He must have loved her a lot."

"Yeah," Chris said. "She died when we were in college, actually, and that day -- well. Let's just say it just wasn't easy for him."

Justin sighed, because feeling sorry for JC and being concerned about him wasn't where he'd hoped to end up with this conversation. It was almost impossible to reconcile the JC he'd met last summer with the JC who was currently terrorizing the press -- adding in the JC who had been devastated over losing his grandmother was too much. If anything, he was now going to be even more confused.

"But that's probably enough about all that," Chris murmured and then raised his eyebrows and laughed out loud, looking at someone behind Justin's back. "Jesus Christ -- you're actually gonna eat with me today?"

"Canceled a lunch meeting just so I could have the pleasure," a dry, familiar voice said, and Justin sat up very straight and felt his spine tingle, then turned around and took a deep breath as he faced JC.

"Oh," JC said in a low voice as his eyes flashed over Justin, and then looked slowly, carefully back and forth between Justin and Chris. "So you know each other."

"We work together, stupid -- of course we do," Chris said, and kicked out a chair for JC. "Sit."

But before JC could do that, Justin lurched to his feet, hastily gathering together the remains of his lunch. "Take this seat, okay?" he said, looking into silver-sharp eyes and as usual having to force himself not to respond. "I was just on my way out."

"Justin, c'mon," Chris said, obviously exasperated. "Isn't this a bit --"

"No, see, I have a meeting at, uh, one, and I need to prepare for it." Justin began to back away from the table, horribly, frustratingly aware of the fact that JC was looking him up and down again, taking in his old shirt, his comfortable jeans, his too-casual shoes. "So I just -- see you guys later, okay?"

JC shrugged without answering, then sat down next to Chris and opened his own sandwich.

"Bye," Chris said, and Justin fled.

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As Justin hurried out of the deli, JC followed him closely with his eyes. Yes, the jeans were inappropriate, but JC wasn't sorry at all to have seen him in them. They were faded and comfortable and they hit him low on the hips, and JC wasn't absolutely sure, but he thought that there might be the beginnings of a small tear high on the back of one thigh. He squinted a little, hoping to catch just a glimpse of golden skin, just a tiny little bit to remind himself -- until Chris broke in and ruined everything.

"Jesus, Chasez. Drool much?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, JC said, regretfully dragging eyes away from Justin and giving Chris a clear, cold stare. He could have been looking at anything, really. Chris didn't necessarily know.

"Yeah, you know, that stare of death thing?" Chris gave him an evil grin. "It hasn't worked on me in years, if ever, JC. Now Justin -- I'll bet he blushes a little bit, starts stammering, maybe even takes a step or two back from you. And I'll bet you love that. I'll bet you eat that shit up."

JC twisted the cap off his water bottle and took a long drink, and he was not going to think about Justin all nervous and flustered, absolutely not.

"Fortunately for me, I've known you far too long and far too well to be fooled by any of your power tricks," Chris proudly told him. "And one day, so will Justin."

JC had better things to do than put up with this.

"So, how was your morning? Did you get the comments from marketing on the Stanton cover?" he asked Chris.

"Judging from the way I see you looking at him, I know you're interested, but what I can't figure out is whether you've slept with him yet," Chris went on cheerfully. "On one hand, I'm fairly certain that you have, because I just spent an entire lunch reassuring him that you don't, in fact, hate him. Given your rather . . . unique approach to love and intimacy, that seems pretty much par for the course. But on the other --"

"Because I think they were wrong," JC interrupted. If he simply pretended to be having another conversation entirely, sometimes Chris would fall in step. "If we make the author's name larger, we're going to ruin the balance of the thing, going to start overshadowing the image."

"Yeah -- it's a great picture," Chris said, and then added, "But on the other hand, he's so, so tense around you that it's almost as if the two of you have never even looked at each other in that way. So you see, I'm on the fence here."

"So if you want to overrule them, you have my support." JC put down his sandwich and then pointed at Chris and gave in. "And shut the fuck up about him, because I'm not going to discuss it with you. I wouldn't discuss it with you even if it weren't colossally inappropriate."

"I doubt they'll give me any problems, but thanks." Chris grabbed a crumpled napkin, then threw it across the room toward the wastebasket, missing by a wide margin and earning a glare from the women behind the counter. "I'll be right back," he told JC, and then hurried across the room to throw it away properly.

"It's just that he's so completely your type," he went on after he returned as JC chewed turkey and wished he were anywhere else in the universe. "You do have a type, you know, with both women and men."

"Everyone has a type," JC said, and then suspiciously narrowed his eyes at Chris as he realized something awful. "Maybe he's your type."

Chris grinned. "Oh, yes, absolutely my type, JC. Imagine what you'll do when I get tired of worshiping him from afar and finally decide to fight you for him."

"I'm not competing with you -- I don't have to compete with you --" JC began with a fierceness that surprised him, and then broke off in embarrassment.

"Of course you don't," Chris said softly. "You've already got him, don't you?"

JC shook his head. "I'm not having this conversation."

"I know, I know; you're a private guy and I'm teasing you and you hate it. I've always gotten that about you. But JC, how many years am I going to have to sit here and watch you not go for what you want because of the messed-up rules you have in your head?"

"Not fraternizing with employees is a bad rule?" JC found it impossible to mask the incredulity in his voice. "Is there anything you want to tell me about the art department?"

Chris rolled his eyes. "Have you always been this unfunny or was I just too stoned in college to notice?"

"And here you wonder why I don't confide in you," JC snapped.

"Look -- it's just that seriously, JC, he seems like a nice guy -- a really nice guy, someone who would actually be really good for your narrow, repressed self. And yeah, I know the boss-employee thing makes it complicated, but this kind of chance doesn't come along all that often, and you should really -- you should go for it, you ask him out or something, go get a drink after work. That's all I'm saying."

"Chris, I just --"

"You don't have to confirm or deny anything. I'm not even going to make you admit to checking out his ass, even though you were -- you so totally, absolutely were. Just -- think about maybe getting to know him a bit, all right?"

JC caught himself from smiling just in time. Think about Justin? If Chris only knew.

"Yeah. Thanks," JC said shortly, and then finished off his sandwich and got to his feet. "Okay -- I have to go. I've got a meeting in ten minutes."

"A meeting? Why, so does Justin," Chris said gleefully, and then laughed in JC's face as he tried yet another stare of death.

April

April

JC worked out on machines almost every morning but the one concession he made to the weekend was to try to jog in Central Park on Saturday mornings. He considered it an indulgence -- it actually took longer to get the same level of workout because he usually used his high-tech treadmill and set it for a brisk uphill pace to get the maximum effect in the least amount of time. Time was always at a premium, but on fine Saturday mornings he would allow himself to sleep in for an extra half-hour, and if weather permitted, to run outside.

This morning he reached the park a bare half-hour after dawn, and while he stretched out his eyes lingered on the dramatic landscaping at the park's entrance. Spring had sprung, apparently while he wasn't paying attention, and the floral display at the entrance to the park was nothing short of breathtaking. The traffic noises behind him seemed ugly and out of place, and for a moment he wished that he didn't have to be in the city today, that he could go to his house in Connecticut and spend the weekend, the week, maybe the entire month there. He sighed as he switched legs and leaned over, feeling the good pull of muscles as he wrapped a hand around the toe of his shoe and carefully stretched his hamstring. He'd been thinking thoughts like that all too often lately.

The sun was barely up and there were very few people around, mostly solitary joggers like himself. As he started to walk down the path he'd selected he took a series of deep breaths and tried to shake off the feelings of dissatisfaction that had plagued him recently. His grandmother had always urged him to take pleasure in the things around him, to appreciate each moment for what it was instead of rushing through life, and JC reminded himself to look around as he moved deeper into the park. It was a beautiful morning, crisp and cool. There was a mist coming off the lake and as he moved down the path the quiet of the park wrapped around him as the traffic noises gradually dimmed. It almost made him smile.

He started to jog, feeling his muscles slowly warm and his breath grow deeper as he fell into a good and easy rhythm. For a few precious moments he was relaxed, but he hadn't gone half a mile before his mind began to tick over the things that he had to accomplish this day: he needed to go into the office, and he wanted to look over the manuscript that he hoped Justin had reviewed, signed off on, and left on his desk. JC was counting on that manuscript being completely polished because he also needed to outline an agenda for an important meeting with the author and the marketing department. This was a real problem author, someone who needed to be handled with extra care. He also was obligated to attend a black tie event that night for a huge charity fund raiser, which also meant he needed to pick up a corsage for Bobbie.

JC tried repeatedly to push it all away, to enjoy the peaceful morning, the calm, smooth lake and the sounds of the birds as they begin to wake up. But it was no use. Pretty soon he was running at a punishing pace and scowling fiercely as his mind got busier and busier.

He followed the trail as it curved away from the lake and into a lightly wooded area, but he was focused unseeingly on the path in front of him and his mind was already in his office, working. When a jogger from another path drew up and fell into an easy rhythm beside him, several seconds passed before JC realized that it was Justin.

Justin was wearing ancient basketball shorts and a shirt that had once been black and was now faded to the color of oatmeal. It said "Stop pretending that you don't want me" in peeling yellow letters stretched tightly across his chest, and he had a baseball cap on his head and very expensive -- albeit worn and ratty -- jogging shoes on his feet. Justin glanced sideways and smiled at JC without speaking, and JC was surprised into almost-smiling back. Justin looked so relaxed and peaceful and almost happy, even though his eyes were puffy from sleep and he hadn't shaved and he was flushed and sweating profusely. When they passed other joggers Justin nodded a little, sometimes smiled and was greeted pleasantly in return. Justin, JC realized, was completely enjoying his morning run, and JC felt a stab of envy so sharp he almost staggered.

Other than exchanging wordless nods of greeting they did not speak. When the path forked JC chose the one to the right and Justin moved easily with him, his stride relaxed and loose. He obviously was a seasoned jogger, not one of the red-faced and panting novices they occasionally passed. His steps matched JC’s pace perfectly, and after a few minutes JC realized that while thinking about Justin was something he tried very hard not to do too much of, this morning it had given him a break from obsessing about the day and all the work ahead of him.

They gradually slowed as the path led them to one of the park entrances and JC leaned over, catching his breath and stretching his hamstrings. It had been a solid three-mile run for JC, and based on the wetness of his shirt, longer than that for Justin. Beside him Justin bent over and braced himself on his knees for a moment before sinking to the grass and pointing and flexing his toes. JC was aware of Justin's eyes on him as he leaned to the side and pulled his muscles taut, and he looked deliberately down to meet his eyes.

Justin was staring at JC’s legs, but he looked up and smiled cautiously as JC raised his eyebrows. He seemed to be struggling with a decision, and JC waited with a bewildering mixture of amusement, anticipation and dread for Justin to speak.

"Uh, so. I didn't know you jogged here," he finally said. "I mean, because I’ve been coming here every morning since daylight savings time kicked in," Justin continued in a rush. "And I've never seen you here before."

JC stared at Justin for three beats too long. Justin’s eyes were bright and his shirt was patchy with sweat, clinging to his body in a way that JC found painfully hypnotic. He watched almost hungrily as a flush crawled up Justin’s neck and bloomed across his face before he answered.

"Justin," he murmured as he stood up straight and stretched his arms over his head. He felt a fierce pleasure as Justin’s smile dropped away and his jaw grew slack. "Are you insinuating that I don't keep myself . . . fit?" he asked, and smiled slowly as Justin blinked and swallowed hard.

"No." Justin cleared his throat and gave him a tentative smile, his eyes bright with appreciation. "I mean, no, I'm not saying that at all. I just figured you used some fancy gym. What I meant to say," he said with some deliberation, his eyes skittering over JC's form and then quickly away, "is that you just don't seem the outdoorsy type. That's what I meant."

JC struggled with the completely unacceptable urge to tell Justin about his house in Connecticut, the thick woods around it, the deer he often saw there when he took the long path to the nearby lake. Justin, he thought dimly, would really like it there, would be appreciative of its beauty and simplicity. With an effort he shook himself back to reality. What on earth was wrong with him?

"Well, I don't usually have time during the week," he explained, tearing his eyes away from Justin's and stretching up again, flexing his fingers before shrugging. It was time for him to leave. He needed to get away from Justin's seductive presence, he needed to shower and eat and get to the office. He had a very full day ahead of him.

Justin rose to his feet to stand next to him and JC wasn't noticing the faint scent of his sweat or his firm thighs, lightly dusted with blond hair. He wasn't having a suddenly vivid sense memory of how soft the skin at Justin's waist was, or the way it tasted when it was slightly damp with sweat, like it was now.

"So, there's this place, about three blocks up that way." Justin gestured vaguely toward the street, frowning. "They have good breakfasts, really good ones, and if you get there early there's no wait, usually, and it's pretty cheap." JC noted the utterly charming blush was back and he smiled a little as he watched Justin make a small, exasperated face at himself. "Not that you care about that, but my point is, the food is really good and there's a lot of it. And, you know, if you're hungry . . ." He hesitated, and then plunged on. "I mean, I'm going there, now. Because I'm hungry. Maybe you'd like to go too."

He continued to stare intently up the street and JC turned to face him, studying Justin's profile. He'd handed Justin more than one rejection lately, and he admired Justin's bravery in making this overture. JC had no time today to waste with breakfast; he had things to do and his usual morning protein shake was waiting for him at home. Going out for breakfast was simply not an option. So why did the thought of sitting across a table from Justin in a greasy spoon diner, both of them in sweaty, disgusting jogging clothes, hold so much appeal?

"I really don't have the time," he said with more than a little regret, and stopped, surprised, when Justin whipped around to face him.

"If you're worried about getting that manuscript done today, you shouldn't," Justin said almost fiercely. "It's done, it's more than done. Seriously, it's the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen, and I stayed late to make sure you wouldn't have to do a single thing to it, other than read and enjoy it. It's all there for you to review, and I know you're thinking about the agenda for the meeting with the author on Monday, but I know that author and have something drafted for you to look over too. Everything is all ready, JC. It's, I mean, I don't think it's going to take much to get ready for that meeting." He paused, breathing quickly, and JC watched him closely as Justin composed himself and shrugged.

"And, you know," Justin added, suddenly casual and more than a little remote. "My mom always said that it's important to start off your day with a good breakfast."

"Yeah," JC said, surprising himself. "My grandmother always said the same."

Justin smiled at him with a bewitching mixture of shyness and persuasion, and JC felt his resistance crumble. "Well, let's go then," Justin said lightly. "I'll buy."

JC made a gesture. "Lead the way," he said simply and felt the force of Justin's pleased smile all the way to his toes as they turned and headed up the street together, their steps perfectly matched.

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JC had barely noticed when his assistant left the book in his in-box; he'd been on a transatlantic conference call that had taken all his attention. It had been a very, very busy afternoon and when he finally focused on it, hours and hours later, the sight of it made him scowl. It wasn't one of the books he'd been in favor of keeping, and he would have cut it from the list immediately if it hadn't already been in production. With a mental sigh he picked it up and leafed through it with an utter lack of interest. The cover was staid and dull, the colors muted, the graphic simplistic. Even the font seemed old-fashioned and stodgy.

It was when he looked at the back cover and frowned at the lackluster description that he noticed it. For a long moment he stared at the small bar code and its ISBN number while his heart rate accelerated and the edges of his vision began to pulse red. He slammed the book down on his desk with controlled fury and turned to his computer. As the list came up he stared at the number assigned to this book, and then looked hard at the book's cover again. The number was wrong.

Five minutes later, JC's assistant anxiously delivered the production files for the book to JC, and one minute after that, JC was scanning the various memos and in-house checklists, searching fiercely to see what had gone wrong, where the system had broken down. When he saw that only one person, Joey Fatone, had reviewed the final cover comp, and when he saw the note to the production manager that Joey had written -- "Print run for this one is rather small, and this sat on my desk for far too long, so push it through without routing to anyone else, okay?" -- JC was on his feet and out the door of his office before he even realized he was moving. His heart pounded heavily in his ears as he strode down the hallway and thundered down the spiral stairs that led to the acquisitions department two at a time. He was dimly aware of people scuttling out of his way as he passed and one man actually dropped the folders he was carrying but JC didn't slow down until he reached the door of Joey's office. He knocked once, perfunctorily, and then burst inside.

An advance copy of the book was on Joey's desk, but the office was empty, the computer off, the lights dark. JC yanked the sleeve of his shirt up and glared at his watch. Not even 6:00 and Joey, who had yet to put in a full day that entire week, had apparently left early.

For a moment the rage threatened to consume him and JC clenched his teeth, biting back the curse, aware of the interested ears in the hallway. A print run of 3,000 of Joey's book in the warehouse ready to ship to wholesalers the next morning with an incorrect ISBN number, and

Joey obviously hadn't even cared enough to check the advance copy before he'd left. He couldn't believe it.

JC took a deep breath and loosened his grip on the offending book. New stickers would have to be generated, and they'd all have to be affixed by hand before shipping the next day. And the person who'd fucked it up, he thought savagely, was going to be the one to fix it.

He strode out of Joey's silent office and down the hall to Justin's. Justin's assistant had left but there was a square of light slanting into the darkened hallway and as he expected, Justin was bent over his desk, frowning intently at a manuscript. He pushed aside the sly observation that Justin looked adorable with his wire-rimmed glasses, that his mouth looked soft and lush as he nibbled on his lower lip, that his shoulders filled out his dark blue shirt perfectly, and then ruthlessly crushed his response to the bright smile that lit up Justin's face when he looked up and saw JC in his doorway.

"There's been a colossal fuckup," JC snapped without preamble, and watched the smile drop tragically from Justin's face as he carefully set his pen down. He tossed the book on Justin's desk and watched his brow furrow as he slowly picked it up. "Your boss," he continued in a low and deadly tone that he just managed to keep from shaking with rage, "circumvented the normal cover check and didn't check the ISBN, and now it's wrong." He watched comprehension and dismay spread over Justin's face, saw him gulp.

"This . . . these are part of what's shipping tomorrow?" Justin asked quietly, and JC could tell by the tone of his voice that he already knew the answer. He waited grimly as Justin turned the book over and looked at the back cover; saw him heave a deep breath as he examined the ISBN.

"I want you to find him," JC continued quietly. "Call him at home or wherever the hell he is, and tell him to get his ass back here. Every one of these books of his will have to be re-stickered. Tonight."

Justin was pale, but his chin rose stiffly as he pulled his glasses off and stood up. "This is my fault," he said firmly and JC restrained the urge to roll his eyes. "It is," Justin insisted. "I knew I should've checked the final copy before it went out, I must have missed the number . . ."

"Justin, I have seen the checklist. I know whose responsibility this is," JC said, his teeth clenched. "Throwing yourself on your sword is very dramatic and noble, but you didn't have anything to do with the final review on this one. I wish you had," he added sardonically, "but you didn't. This is Joey's fuckup." He paused and took a deep breath, and continued in a slightly calmer tone. "Now, please get him in here to clean it up."

He turned away abruptly, not wanting to see Justin's face or hear any more of his attempts to cover for Joey. He strode back to his office as quickly as he'd come and as he gave instructions to his assistant to print the new ISBN labels he thought furiously that Joey was lucky he hadn't been in his office right then. If JC had seen him, he might have been tempted to wring his neck. He couldn't understand why Justin had such loyalty to him.

It was more than an hour before JC decided he'd calmed down sufficiently to go to the warehouse and have an adult conversation with Joey. He expected that Joey would be there along with whichever of his editors he'd been able to cajole into helping him sticker the books, so it was something of a surprise to find a disheveled Justin with his tie gone and his sleeves rolled up, sitting all alone in the darkened warehouse, silently putting sticker after sticker on stacks of new books.

And just like that JC was enraged again. "What the hell are you doing down here?"

"I told you," Justin said levelly as he carefully placed a sticker on a book and put it in the neat pile beside him. "This screw-up is my fault, so I'm going to fix it." He reached into an open box and drew out three more books. He did not even glance at JC.

JC closed his eyes and took a long, slow, deep breath. "Who's helping you?" he asked quietly and opened his eyes to see Justin calmly opening another box.

"I didn't ask for help. I don't see any reason to force other people to pay for my mistake," Justin said serenely. "I can handle it just fine."

JC looked at the pallet holding the 3,000 books. Justin was going to be there all night, and he still might not make the morning shipment deadline. JC felt his hands clench into fists. This wasn't even Justin's responsibility -- Justin wouldn't have ever made such a careless error in the first place.

Without a word he wheeled around and strode out of the warehouse, moving quickly back to his office. The halls were mostly silent; everyone in the press had gone home. JC hesitated for a moment as he looked at his desk. He had so much work to do tonight; he'd canceled his evening plans in the hopes of getting things done so he wouldn't have to devote his entire weekend to catching up. Then he thought about Justin, alone in the silent warehouse with a pile of stickers and a shipping pallet full of books, and he sighed as he turned to the small closet in the corner of his office. He was pretty sure he had jeans and a old shirt he didn't care about in there.

He made a couple of telephone calls before changing out of his suit and heading grimly back down to the warehouse. Justin was right where he'd left him, sitting at the metal desk on the receiving dock and methodically putting stickers on the books. JC leaned against the door jam and crossed his arms, watching silently as Justin placed a book gently back into its box, careful not to crease the cover or damage the edge. JC pulled his gaze from Justin's precise and economical movements and looked at the pallet full of books. Five boxes down, JC noted bleakly. 115 to go.

Justin opened the next box, pulled the Styrofoam placeholders out, and neatly stacked the books on the metal desk, back side up. He looked up from the sheet of stickers and froze as JC walked into the warehouse and moved toward him, his eyes flickering over JC's jeans and long-sleeved tee shirt. Then his mouth compressed, his features sharp and pale in the dim light.

"I told you I can handle this," he said tightly.

"And I told you to get the person responsible to handle it," JC shot back.

"I am the person responsible," Justin asserted. "And I don't need your help." The sheet of labels in his hand was shaking slightly, JC noted with some interest. He was hiding it well but Justin was very, very agitated, and JC felt some of his anger subside.

"Well, it'll go faster with some help," JC said carefully. "Or are you going to fight me on that too?"

Justin seemed to hesitate, his eyes stubbornly on the stack of books in front of him.

"I'm sure you have other things to do," he said quietly. "More important things."

JC allowed himself to study Justin, to really look at him. He seemed drawn and pale in the dim light of the warehouse. His shoulders were slightly hunched, and there were bags under his blue eyes. He looked angry and upset and very tired.

"I do," JC agreed. "But I wouldn't be able to concentrate on the things I need to concentrate on, knowing that this was going on down here." He waited for Justin to digest that, saw him accept it with a shrug, his eyes still on the books in front of him. "So, let's just get this done, okay? And we can forgo the discussion of blame and responsibility and consequences."

Justin's mouth tightened again, but when he opened his mouth to respond he was interrupted by a knock at the receiving door. JC pulled his eyes away from the clean lines of Justin's profile and moved to answer it.

"I ordered food," he threw over his shoulder as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "I haven't eaten and I'm pretty sure you haven't either."

When he returned a moment later with the food Justin was still seated at the desk, and seemed to have regained his composure. He looked up cautiously when JC approached and eyed the bags with interest as JC set them down on the corner of the desk. His cheeks were pink.

"So, what did you get?"

JC opened the first bag and pulled out a neat Styrofoam container and some plastic silverware. "Pork chops," he said, peering inside. "Rice, vegetables, just the basics. This one," he indicated the other bag, "should be chicken. You can pick."

Justin snorted a little, but he was smiling as he shook his head. "And this is what you call the basics. Most people would've called for pizza," he informed JC with some amusement. "I mean, something easy and fast? You had to order a three course meal?"

JC drew himself up haughtily but couldn't stop the smile that twitched across his mouth. "Yes, well, your mom says the key to a good day is breakfast, and mine is more of a good dinner advocate." He was ridiculously pleased to see Justin smile at him as he picked up his plastic fork and started to attack his meal. Then Justin hesitated, and reached for his back pocket.

"Let me pay you for this," he started, and JC waved it away.

"Don't worry about it."

Justin looked up, immediately distressed. "No. I mean, I wanted to buy breakfast that one morning, that day after the park, and you grabbed the bill too fast. Let me do this."

Ah, yes. Breakfast that one Saturday morning, the morning he'd run into Justin at the park. The memory of that meal had taken on the qualities of a surreal dream for JC; more than once he'd wondered if it had really happened at all. Had he really sat next to Justin at the counter of a greasy spoon diner early on a Saturday morning, sipping coffee and eating a Denver omelet?

Had he really listened to Justin talk about a movie he'd seen that week, and discussed the previous night's hockey game, which Justin had watched on television and JC had listened to on the radio while he worked at home? Had they really argued amiably about a foul call in the third quarter while JC wondered silently how Justin could smell so good first thing in the morning after a long, hard run?

JC had spent a fair amount of time not thinking about that morning.

"Justin," he finally said. "Don't worry about it."

Justin regarded him silently for a moment, then slowly tucked his own wallet back into his pocket. "Okay. Well, thank you," he said quietly. "And, you know, next time I'll buy you dinner." His eyes were very dark and for a long moment JC couldn't look away.

JC's fingers shook a little as he picked up the next sheet of ISBN stickers. "Sure," he said, just as quietly, and watched with interest as Justin looked down and licked his lips. It felt suddenly warmer in the dim warehouse, and he blinked to clear his head. "Next time."

After that they worked in silence for a long time as they stickered books and quietly ate their meals. They developed an efficient rhythm, taking turns opening and re-boxing the books. Justin cleared away the remains of their meals and turned on the small radio above the small desk after politely asking JC if he minded. JC didn’t. It sparked an easy discussion about music, and JC learned that Justin liked almost every genre except classic country.

"I can’t believe someone from Tennessee, someone who loves bluegrass, doesn’t like country music," JC commented.

"I can’t believe a rich ivy-league boy like yourself does," Justin countered, and his bright eyes and easy smile startled JC into a real laugh.

"Hey now," he said. "You’re the one who went to Harvard." It was astounding -- he was sitting in a dusty warehouse in the middle of the night doing mind-numbing, menial work, and he was actually enjoying himself.

Hours passed, and he and Justin talked peacefully about topics that had nothing to do with the press or the books and stickers in front of them. Then they were on the last box, and Justin

took a deep breath and said "JC, look. I really wish you wouldn't mention this to Joey."

JC stared at him in disbelief. The comfortable relaxation he'd enjoyed for the last few hours drained away, leaving him cold. "Why on earth would you ask me to do that?"

Justin shifted uncomfortably. "I know you don't agree with me," he said simply, "but I really do feel responsible for the ISBN. Joey's never been good with this sort of detail," he said in a rush as JC started to object. "I mean, he's always depended on me to take care of these things, and it's my fault that the number was missed."

JC stared at him and struggled to bring his temper under control. "No," he said flatly. "I appreciate your loyalty, but the answer is no."

Unbelievably, Justin's face flushed with anger. "Look," he said, his voice starting to rise. "I just told you, it's part of my job to . . ."

"Stop right there," JC said fiercely. "Don't try to tell me what part of this is your job, or what part of it is Joey Fatone's. Don't you dare try to insult me with this ridiculous line of thought. Do you really think I don't know how the press operates? Do you really think that I don't know whose responsibility this," he brandished the last book at Justin, watching him clench his teeth, "this fuckup is?"

"I'm trying to tell you," Justin said loudly, his fingers clenching into fists. "I just don't think that it's fair to blame . . ."

"Fair?" JC interrupted incredulously. "You want to talk about fairness here? How fair is it that Joey Fatone refused to take responsibility for this book? *His* book, Justin. How fair is it that he's home sleeping and you're here at," he cocked an eye at the clock above the receiving door, "three-thirty in the morning, fixing his mistake?"

"That's not the way it happened -- Joey didn't refuse to come, I just couldn't get in touch with him and then I figured, you know, this whole thing was my fault in the first place." Justin made an angry gesture and his voice rose. "You're so goddamn arrogant! If you'd just shut up for a minute, and let me explain!!" Justin's face was flushed wildly; he was shouting and JC felt his pulse pound in fury.

"Watch your mouth," JC warned tightly, and Justin threw him a resentful look.

"Don't tell me what to do," he answered furiously. "You don't know how things work in our department. You've only been here for a little while, you don't know how we operate, how we get things done . . ." and in a flash JC was toe to toe with him, right up in his personal space and watching closely as Justin's eyes widened and his mouth closed with an audible snap.

"I told you to watch your mouth," JC hissed, and he was too close, he could see Justin's eyes dilate, hear his suddenly indrawn breath and watch the way his eyes dropped almost helplessly to JC's mouth. He didn't move away, not even the slightest bit. JC struggled hard with his shredding control for a long, silent moment, his hands curling into fists and his head spinning as he watched Justin's mouth drop slightly open.

Then Justin leaned in and covered JC's mouth with his own.

JC went completely still for an endless moment as Justin's lips pressed firmly into his, his anger shuddering into something darker and deeper. Oh, this was familiar. He remembered this all too well -- the feel of Justin's gorgeous, slick mouth, the way he smelled faintly of a musky aftershave, the way his long fingers curled into JC's waist as he eased closer. Thoughts raged furiously through his head: drag Justin closer, stop him, pull away, lean in; and then he shivered and parted his lips, inviting Justin in. Justin's breath hitched; he wrapped his arms around JC and pulled him tightly against his body as their tongues tangled.

This, JC realized dimly, was something he'd wanted since he'd walked into the warehouse hours and hours ago. It was something he'd wanted since seeing Justin in his office earlier that day. It was something he'd wanted from the first time he'd seen Justin in his own living room, all those months ago. He tightened his own arms around Justin's waist and tilted his head, angling deeper and luxuriating in the feel of Justin's large hands smoothing shakily down his own back. This was what he wanted, he thought fuzzily, preoccupied with Justin's greedy mouth and feel of his narrow hips under his palms as he pulled him closer, nestling him tightly against his body until they both gasped. This, right here. Right now.

"Oh god, you make me crazy," Justin mumbled thickly as he broke the kiss to mouth JC's jaw line. His voice, low and husky, sent a thin shiver down JC's spine and he gasped as Justin's tongue found the pulse on the side of his neck. JC's hands had slid down to curve around Justin's ass and pull him tighter, grinding deliciously even as his brain started to work, started to remind him of things he desperately didn't want to think about.

It caused him actual physical pain to pull his hands away from Justin's lean body and step back from his hands and his hypnotic mouth. When he did JC realized that his knees were shaking and he couldn't seem to catch his breath. He didn't even try to hide his arousal and from the glazed look in Justin's eyes, he was in much the same state. JC tried to breathe evenly and thought bleakly that the attraction between them was as powerful now, in this least seductive of surroundings, as it had been nearly a year ago in the bedroom of his penthouse.

"You know we can't do this," JC said, surprised at the husky tone of his own voice, horrified that it trembled a little. "I'm your . . . I mean, we can't do this."

"Remind me," Justin said roughly. He was breathing hard, his face flushed and his eyes glittering. His mouth was red and swollen and JC closed his eyes so he couldn't see Justin slowly rub the back of his hand across his lips. "I'm sure there are a dozen reasons," Justin continued breathlessly, leaning closer. "Just -- remind me why we can't do this. Give me the top three."

Abruptly JC was angry again, furious that he was stepping away from the one thing that had given him honest pleasure in god knew how long. "I shouldn't have to give you even *one*," he said tightly. "C'mon, Justin, you're smarter than this."

Justin sucked in a deep breath and JC waited for his furious retort with something like eagerness. He wanted to hear Justin get angry. He realized with a far-off feeling of panic that

he wanted Justin to argue with him. He wanted Justin to convince him that sex in the cold and dark warehouse of the Phoenix Press was the best idea either of them had had all week.

But Justin let his breath go with a deep sigh, and with a feeling of near-despair JC watched him turn away and bring a shaking hand to his forehead. "Oh god," he murmured quietly. His eyes were a huge, blurry blue. "Okay, you're right," he said, his voice gaining strength. "I'm, um. I'm really sorry, JC. That was just, just stupid." Justin squared his shoulders and took another deep breath, turning to face JC with his face completely impassive except for the high flush across his cheekbones and down his neck, disappearing beneath the open neck of his shirt. JC kept himself from looking lower with an effort that almost made him tremble. He cleared his throat and turned away.

"Okay, well. I guess we're done here?"

"Yeah," Justin said slowly. "Yeah, I'll just double check that the boxes are closed and leave a note for the shipping guy."

JC stared at the clock above the doors, aware of Justin moving to the pallet behind him. "Do you want me to wait for you?" he asked stiffly. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth as he waited for Justin to answer.

The silence was long and painful. "That's okay," said Justin, subdued. "I'll just, uh, check this stuff and then I'll head out." He took a deep breath, let it out. "There's no need for you to wait."

JC nodded firmly, still facing the door. "Okay then. Goodnight," he said and did not look back as he forced himself to walk away.

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Justin put the phone down, then sat very still in his office and tried to calm himself as his heart began to pound in double-time. It was okay. It was going to be okay. Everyone had setbacks; every project had its dark moments. If you kept moving forward, things usually worked out, no matter how bad it seemed.

But it was very hard to see how he was going to get out of this problem, how he was going to get Thomas Kearney, the author he'd been wooing for months, out of the clutches of Fitzgerald Random, the biggest, glossiest publishing house in New York.

"Damn," he said out loud, then bent forward to rest his forehead on his desk and squeezed his eyes shut. The one book he'd really wanted, the one project he'd been staking his department's financial hopes on, and now this: Kearney apologetically but kindly letting him know that he'd started contract negotiations with Fitzgerald Random. At least he'd had the decency to do that -- some authors and their agents cut you off without a word, turned their backs on you and simply stopped taking your calls. At least Kearney had told him that he'd see him again, that they could talk further, and it was possible, Justin guessed, that he could lure him back. Phoenix Press might not have the resources, money, or name recognition that Fitzgerald Random did, and they might not be able to offer even half the advance he'd get from FR, but he could still . . . he could still . . .

Oh god. It was a disaster, an absolute disaster. Justin breathed in and out very slowly and tried not to shake, tried not to let the beginnings of panic stirring in his stomach spread and take over the rest of him. There had to be a way out of this. He'd find another author -- he'd find another book -- he'd --

Justin stood up immediately to stop the bad thoughts, then headed straight for Joey's office. Joey would know what to do, and even if he didn't, he always managed to make Justin feel better about things.

When he returned to his own office a few moments later, Justin was feeling out of sorts and slightly shaken. Joey had been kind -- no surprise there -- but he'd also been strangely . . . uninterested in the dilemma Justin had put forth to him.

"You know, it might be best just to accept this and move on," Joey had said. "There's just no way Phoenix Press can promote a book the way Fitzgerald Random can -- we don't have the marketing staff, we don't have the money, we don't have the resources. And if this author wants to be big, well, you see what I'm saying here. We probably can't even afford to print enough to meet the sales he's hoping for. I hate to be a bear about it, but it's probably not worth the fight to try to keep this guy."

"But I want the book!" Justin had told him. "I need it for the list."

"Justin," Joey had sighed, "sometimes these things just don't work out. If I were you, I actually might take this as a lesson about the kinds of authors this press can and cannot get. If you continue to compete on the wrong playing field, you're never going to win."

As he thought about those words now, Justin unhappily drew his brows together. Joey was maybe right, and Justin would take his advice into consideration in the future, but none of that changed the fact that Justin needed Thomas Kearney's book now, this season, right away.

"Justin, what are you doing?"

His spirits sinking further, Justin exhaled, raised his head, and looked into the sharp, curious face of JC Chasez as he stepped neatly inside his office, then stood leaning casually against the door jamb.

Oh god, Justin thought as he realized that he was going to have to tell JC about the Kearney situation. But if he could put up a good enough front, maybe that discussion didn't have to happen now.

"Bad day," Justin said, running a hand over his hair and sitting back in his chair, trying for all he was worth not to appear as disheveled as he felt. JC looked, as always, cool and elegant: today he had on a dark blue suit that fit him with almost sinful precision, and the white shirt he wore with it was crisp and lovely against his neck.

"Anything I can help you with?" JC asked, and for a moment, Justin longed to blurt it all out, to get counsel, to talk through this problem in detail with JC, whose ability to reel people in and make them do what he wanted them to do was so good it was almost scary.

But to do that would be to reveal himself as a failure -- it would be utterly humiliating, and Justin didn't want to go through it, didn't want to have to see pity or condescension on JC's face. He needed JC to believe in him, needed him to approve of his work.

"Thanks, but no. I'm fine, really." Justin said it with all the confidence he could muster and tagged a smile on the end for good measure.

JC looked skeptically at him, his glance eyes steady and unwavering. He was apparently going to wait it out until Justin spoke.

"No, really, I just --" Justin began, and then sighed, met JC's clear, expectant gaze, and relented. "God. I just -- I really fucked something up, and I'm not sure how I'm going to fix it."

"All right," JC said, and then, to Justin's horror, came all the way into his office, shut the door behind him, and sat down on the chair across from his desk.

"Tell me what happened." JC's voice was calm and nonjudgmental, completely without anger, but it left no question in the world that Justin was going to reveal everything -- and right now.

"It's Thomas Kearney." Justin looked quickly down at his desk, then added, "You know, the guy I've wanted for my lead fall book, the one I've--"

"You're trying to sign him, yes," JC interrupted. "I know that. I know your list. I know who you've been talking to."

"Right," Justin said, trying to hide his amazement, because JC didn't have to bother himself with every single book in every single department, and yet here JC was, intimately familiar with his list, his responsibilities. It was a little overwhelming, and *god,* he didn't want to have this conversation; he absolutely did not want --

"Come on, Justin," JC encouraged, and although Justin could tell from his voice that there was still no way he was going to get out of this, there was something softer about this request, something almost amused. "This is publishing, not brain surgery. There's nothing so horrible we can't fix it, as your supervisor showed us last month. If you've made a mistake, then I want to hear about it. The only way we can figure out how to avoid it happening again is by talking about it."

Justin blinked in surprise. He'd expected JC to go for the jugular, but the look on his face right now was open and patient. And he was absolutely right that it was necessary to talk about mistakes, but that didn't make any of this easier.

But he couldn't hide this forever -- no matter what Justin did, JC was eventually going to know that he'd fucked up his negotiations with Thomas Kearney, and so the best thing probably really was to make a clean breast of it. Justin looked uncertainly at JC, took a deep breath, and plunged in.

"Okay, so yeah. Basically, I've been talking to him and I was pretty sure I had him; we were in end-stage negotiations and everything," Justin said.

JC sat back slightly in the chair, resting the ankle of one leg on the thigh of his other and watching him calmly, waiting. Justin found it absolutely impossible to look him in the eye.

"And so I started to count on him. I put him in my win column, you know, and pretty much built the rest of my list around his book," Justin said, feeling his face heat up, because when he said it out loud like this, the stupidity of that maneuver seemed more than apparent. "But then, see, he calls me today and tells me he's probably going to go with Fitzgerald Random -- he tells me they've been talking to him a lot and I just -- there's no way I can convince him not to do that -- there's no way I can persuade him to stay with us. It seems pretty obvious to me."

"Are you saying that this press has no advantages over Fitzgerald Random?" JC asked in disbelief, for the first time sounding a little bit angry. "Are you actually telling me that you think we have no chance of competing with them? You know better than that. You know there are ways we can fight back."

"Are there?" Justin coughed and looked down, thinking of Joey. "I don't know, JC."

"Justin, why are you working here?" JC asked very slowly and very seriously. "Why did you choose to interview with us rather than Fitzgerald Random? Why did everyone here, for that matter, decide to work at a smaller house instead of going to the conglomerates?"

"Yeah," Justin said as it dawned on him, and now he was embarrassed all over again. "There are reasons; we do do certain things better than they do."

"We do a hell of a lot of things better." JC spoke fiercely and with absolute confidence, and he looked gorgeous, driven and intense and focused. "And you're going to tell that to Mr. Kearney -- you're going to make a case for us, and I'm going make a case for us, and we'll both -- we're going to come at him again and again until he sees the light."

Justin nodded and tried to look convinced.

"You haven't lost the book, Justin. It's not over yet. And as for the overall structure of your list and the place you gave his book in it . . ."

Justin stared in horrified fascination at JC, waiting for the blow to come.

"You took a gamble with that, and that's fine. Actually, that's more than fine -- that's exactly what I want you to do, because if you don't stretch a bit, you're never going to get to the big things. I understand that absolutely."

"But . . ." Justin supplied.

"But contingency plans are good too," JC simply said, and shrugged. "And I'll bet you know that now." He gave Justin an intense, pointed look.

"I, yeah. I'd have to say I do," Justin replied, and ventured a small smile.

"So Thomas Kearney . . ." JC began.

"Right, yeah. Okay. I --" Justin pulled up the calendar on his computer. "I'll go see him tomorrow -- I'll --"

"Actually, I think you should see him tonight."

Justin raised eyebrows in surprise.

"There's a Fitzgerald Random party this evening -- it's to showcase their new authors, and I've been invited," JC told him. "And I want you to come, too; I want you to find this author and bring him to me. We'll talk to him and we'll pull him back, convince him that this press can do a lot more for his book than Fitzgerald Random will."

"Okay." Justin felt tension building up in him again. A party with JC -- negotiating with an author in front of JC. It was a nerve-racking scenario, but it would provide him with a chance to talk to Kearney. And if he thought carefully enough and hard enough, he could come up with a pitch so devastating that no one could resist it -- certainly not Thomas Kearney. Maybe there was hope after all.

"The thing is," JC said, and Justin looked sharply up at him because now he seemed a little less comfortable, considerably less so, actually. "The thing is, the party is black tie, and I don't know -- I mean, I haven't had the chance to observe -- god. Do you have suitable clothing, Justin?"

Justin felt his face stain red, felt it start at his cheekbones and then slowly move down to his neck. "Um, I think you probably already know the answer to that. I mean, I have nice suits and all, but a tux . . ." He shrugged. "Never really needed one."

JC looked carefully at him, his eyes sharp and assessing, traveling over his shoulders; it was almost as if he were fitting him for a jacket himself.

"I mean, I suppose I could rent one -- I know I've seen a couple of places here and there," Justin began. "How hard could it be to --"

"Pretty damn hard, actually, if you want to look halfway decent," JC said absently, and then stood up and looked down at him. "I'm going to call my tailor and have him find something for you. It'll take a lunchtime fitting -- would you be able to do that?"

"Your tailor?" The incredulity in Justin's voice caused JC's mouth to tighten, and Justin silenced himself immediately. "JC, no," he went on in a much quieter tone a second later. "I just -- that doesn't sound like a good idea, and I don't think I --"

How, exactly, did one say that one didn't really have all that much money left at this point in the month, and that even with a brand new paycheck, one absolutely couldn't afford the type of clothes JC wore?

"The press pays for it, of course," JC added almost too quickly, and Justin rubbed the back of his neck, mortified.

"C'mon," JC said, trying to rally him. "It'll be fun, and Paul is a really neat guy. You'll like him."

"JC, I can't accept that. I don't want to, and I --"

"Well you'll have to, because it's an order." JC's voice was unyielding now, brooking no argument. He was obviously tired of this back and forth. "You will go at noon to Paul's and you'll be fitted for a suit and shoes. And then --" He paused and stared at Justin, his eyes sharpening with amusement. "And then I'll show you how to talk nice, which fork to use, and how to eat fancy food."

"Oh come on, now," Justin protested. "You've seen me at a fancy party before, and I behaved myself pretty well there, didn't I?"

As JC lifted his eyebrows, staring at him first in surprise, and then with what appeared to be a steadily growing amusement, Justin felt himself redden.

Justin was now so tongue-tied that speaking was an effort. "I -- yeah. Didn't mean that. I shouldn't have referred to -- I --"

"I'm sure you'll behave yourself tonight. Don't worry about your book, Justin -- we'll get it back." JC smiled faintly, then moved smoothly across the room to open Justin's door. "My assistant will give you information about the tailor. Meet me in my office tonight at 7:30 and we'll go to the party from there."

"All right," Justin said, and then shook his head in amazement as JC left the office.

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Justin looked critically at himself in the bathroom mirror. He looked great -- the suit fit wonderfully and he felt attractive, elegant, and in control. His tie was perhaps a bit crooked, but for the most part, Justin felt confident about his appearance. It would be difficult to tell JC, but he was quite grateful that he'd been sent to a tailor: there hadn't been time, of course, to fit the entire suit, but the adjustments Paul had made were more than evident, from the comfortable way the jacket settled over his shoulders to the perfect length of the sleeves and trousers. Justin widened his eyes at himself in the mirror, then allowed himself a small, satisfied smile. He was going to be just fine at this party.

As he walked through the dark hallway toward the light of JC's office, Justin bent his head for a moment and gave himself a strict talking to. He was going to be smooth and unruffled tonight, sophisticated and convincing. He was going to show JC that he could move easily in this milieu, that he belonged at this sort of party, that JC could trust him to negotiate with authors. He was going to be a success. Justin clenched his fists momentarily to seal the contract with himself, then moved to JC's partially open door and knocked lightly.

"Come in," JC said, and Justin stepped in and took a deep breath as he caught JC standing in front of the windows, his profile clear and lovely against the city scape.

"Hi," he said to fill the silence as JC turned slowly to look at him, silvery eyes moving calmly up and down his body, his facial expression shuttered. Justin sank teeth into his lower lip, then forced himself to speak. "So, do I pass?"

"You, uh," JC said shortly, and then broke off, and Justin suffered a series of agonies as JC looked out the window for a few seconds before speaking again.

"It's great. You look really great, Justin," he finally said, his voice a little strained.

"Thank you. And so do you, or course," Justin said uncomfortably, because JC was looking at him even more closely, frowning a bit now, and he wasn't for the life of him able to figure out what was wrong.

"You were right. Paul is a really nice guy," Justin got out, and then took a couple of anxious steps backward, because now JC was moving easily, confidently toward him, eyes fixed on Justin, still frowning a little, his expression half amused and half determined.

"Uh --" Justin tried again as JC got closer yet, his mouth starting to dry out and his heart pounding a little bit quicker. "Uh, I --"

JC was smiling. "You know that your tie's crooked, right?"

"Oh," Justin said, and looked down, but it was impossible to see the tie perfectly without a mirror in front of him. "I -- yeah. Apparently, I'm not so good at that."

"No, no you're not," JC said, eyes still crinkled in amusement as he moved past Justin to close the door to his office, exposing a full-length mirror.

"If you come here, I'll fix it for you," JC offered, and Justin paused for a moment to collect himself before moving slowly across the white carpet to the mirror. When JC moved behind him, he couldn't help but tense, looking curiously over his shoulder at him.

"From here, I don't have to do it backwards," JC added a little uncomfortably, and Justin told him "I know, I know," as if that had occurred to him years ago, and then slowly settled into place.

Justin held himself very still as he felt JC behind him, sensed the warmth of his body and heard him breathing evenly and regularly, and then bit his lip as JC leaned in, arms resting on his shoulders and then sliding easily around his neck. He was sensitive to everything, hyper aware of JC's cologne, of the sound of JC's suit jacket brushing against his, of the fact that JC's body was mere inches away from his. If JC were to move forward just a bit --

"God, this is awful," JC said in amusement as he loosened Justin's messy, lopsided bow, and Justin laughed uncomfortably and met his eyes in the mirror for a moment.

"It's harder than it looks," he said, and JC smiled at him, then made a small sound of agreement.

"Just be glad that you don't have to do this more often," he said, gracefully threading his fingers through the silk. Justin closed his eyes for a second, enjoying the small, precise movements at his throat, then opened them again and battled an intense urge to lean back, to make their bodies come together the way he knew they should. They looked so right together, JC's arms around him, his head inclined slightly, his hands busy. Justin's own face was tense with need, his eyes dark with excitement.

"There," JC said softly, then placed hands on Justin's shoulders and squeezed once, smiling at him in the mirror. "You're perfect."

Justin swiftly turned around and took a deep, steadying breath. "No, I -- it's you --" he began, then fell silent when JC shook his head, a quick, curt movement of the chin, and then said, "Seriously, Justin. You're beautiful," in a low, sincere voice that made Justin's knees start to quiver.

"Thank you," was all Justin could say out loud, but longing and regret swirled madly in his head. There were so many things he wanted for them, and all of it seemed so impossible.

"All right, then," JC said, stepping back and heading for the desk to turn off his computer. "Let's go."

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"Wow," Justin said as they stepped into the showy lobby of the Fitzgerald Random publishing company and into the thick of the party. They had entered an atrium, and as he slowly lifted his head, Justin could see the glass walls of countless offices overlooking it. They were quiet

and dark now, but he could still tell that they were very large and very expensively equipped, far nicer than any of the offices in the Phoenix Press building.

"Impressive, isn't it?" JC said with just a hint of disdain as they moved past showy brass fixtures and across a field of midnight blue carpet toward the cluster of well-dressed men and women talking and drinking together. It appeared to be the usual book crowd: employees of various houses, with Fitzgerald Random being best represented, of course; several of FR's more distinguished authors; and a coterie of reviewers Justin was beginning to know by sight if not name.

"Um, yeah." Justin nodded politely at a few familiar faces and then came to a stop with JC and methodically scanned the room for Tom Kearney, tension rising in him as he did so. If he could not find the man, then this whole evening was for naught.

"Is he here?" JC asked in a low voice just as Justin caught sight of him.

"By the bar," Justin breathed, greatly relieved, and then squared his shoulders. "Okay. I'm going over there to talk to him."

Suddenly there was a hand curved around his upper arm, fingers pressing lightly into his biceps.

JC's mouth quirked in amusement. "Wait a while, all right? Let him have a few drinks first. We want him in a receptive state."

Justin laughed. "This is how you make all those high-powered corporate deals, isn't it?"

"Deals?" JC looked questioningly at him, then caught himself. "Oh. At Antaeus, you mean."

"Yeah. Antaeus."

"You know, I don't recall actually ever speaking to you about my other job," JC said in a soft, deadly voice.

Justin drew in a sharp breath and tried to explain. "I know, but I just --"

"Chris," JC broke in, looking pleased with himself for figuring it out. "Chris told you, right?"

"Well, Chris and the newspapers," Justin said. "I mean, it's not exactly a secret that you've had this successful other life."

"Yes, well, none of that is really all that relevant here," JC said, frowning, and then looked around the room again.

"I don't know -- I mean, I think those skills might --"

"Do you know who Kearney's editor is?" JC interrupted.

Justin didn't have the slightest idea.

"I'm betting it'll be Robert Stackhouse," JC went on, apparently not needing an answer. "We'll wait until Kearney talks to him, then move in."

"We?" Justin said, unable to conceal the unhappiness in his voice. "JC, I thought -- I kind of hoped --"

"What, Justin?" JC's eyes were demanding even though his voice was patient.

"I wanted to do it myself," Justin told him, mind working furiously as he built the argument. "I'm the one who's developed a relationship with Kearney, and I think I'm the best person to address him first. You -- you can move in after I've had a bit of time with him."

JC slowly released Justin's arm, looking speculatively at him. "All right, but if you do that, then you take full responsibility for what happens here. Are you ready for that?"

"I'm ready," Justin quickly said, in a much more confident voice than he actually had a right to. "He knows me and he likes me, and I'm sure I can --"

JC still looked skeptical but he spoke politely. "You have a pitch planned? A speech?"

"Well, no. I mean, I've thought about it, I've got talking points, but I'm not -- a canned speech or whatever won't work," Justin said nervously.

"Okay, good," JC said, and Justin relaxed a little. Another test passed.

"All right, it's yours," JC finally affirmed, then leaned forward slightly and added, "But again, Justin, let me impress upon you the importance of this meeting. This is not a game, and this is not a casual conversation. We need this book for our list, and . . ."

"I know, I know, and we're not going to lose it." Justin glanced over at Kearney again and then repeated the words silently to himself.

A woman with a tray full of champagne glasses approached them, smiling, and gave them drinks. Justin took a swallow, ran it around on his tongue, then grimaced a little before swallowing.

"Definitely not as good as the stuff you --" he automatically began, and then broke off and felt his cheeks grow warm as next to him, JC tensed a bit. What was wrong with him today? Why was he so compulsively returning to the very evening he and JC could not discuss?

"I've had better, too," JC mildly answered after a few agonizing seconds.

Suddenly the absurdity of it all made Justin grin. "You know, I could maybe stop bringing up that night so much if you prefer."

"Why do that, especially when horrible awkwardness is so fun?" JC teased, then grinned back, a real smile.

A few moments later, a reviewer approached JC, someone old and eminent from the New York Times Book Review, someone whose name Justin could not remember. When JC

introduced him as "one of our best new editors," Justin had to consciously hold himself still, deliberately keep himself from squirming. It could not possibly have been true -- the reason they were here at all was because that editor had fucked up -- but it was good to hear it nonetheless.

The rest of that conversation was a blur to Justin, and when an upper-level editor from FR also approached them, Justin politely nodded and then slowly moved away to get another glass of champagne. As he drank it, Justin watched Tom Kearney out of the corner of his eye: he looked ill at ease and a little overwhelmed. This was a showcase party for a number of FR authors, and Kearney, while important enough to be invited, obviously wasn't yet one of FR's more valued commodities. Unlike Justin, he had on an ill-fitting tuxedo, and he kept wringing his hands and nodding anxiously at the two very young editorial assistants, Justin guessed, who had been assigned to talk to him.

It was not until Justin had finished one more glass of champagne that a tall, thin man wearing very stylized glasses with heavy black frames approached Kearney. Justin looked carefully at him, then darted a glance at JC, who was now talking to someone from the New York Review of Books, languidly, confidently gesturing and looking more handsome than any one man had the right to. Justin willed him with all his might to look back, to exchange a glance, and then let out a small sigh of relief as he saw JC look over at Tom Kearney and his companion. It was only then that he made eye contact with Justin, a single, fierce look and a short nod. It was time to go in.

"Justin!" Tom Kearney said as Justin approached him, his voice full of what sounded suspiciously like relief. "How good to see you here."

"Hi, Tom," Justin said, and gave him a winning grin, then looked expectantly at Robert Stackhouse, who rather unconvincingly and unwelcomingly said, "Oh, hi," without bothering to introduce himself.

"I'm Justin Timberlake," Justin said, reaching out a hand, and after a longish pause, Stackhouse slowly reached out to shake it, a proceeding Tom Kearney watched with some interest. Justin knew from reading Kearney's manuscript and from their conversations that Kearney was absolutely intolerant of snobbery, and so he was sure to give Stackhouse a wide, friendly grin.

"This is quite. . . extravagant," Justin carefully said, gesturing at the room and borrowing the restrained, vaguely disapproving tone he'd heard JC use more than once in meetings. "Let me congratulate you on finding such a successful publisher, Tom."

"I -- yes. I -- well. I wanted to talk to you about that," Tom said guiltily. "I -- our conversations -- well. I was really pleased with all the attention you showed me, and I just --"

"It's fine, Tom," Justin said good-naturedly. "I think authors should go with the publishers whose ideals and principles they most admire, and if Fitzgerald Random is in line with your beliefs about writing and publishing, then I'm very glad for you."

"What lovely sentiments," Robert Stackhouse said in a bored, unpleasant voice. "I'm afraid, however, that I'm going to have to leave you both. Mr. Kearnley, I'll catch up with you again

before the evening is over," he said, and then nodded briefly at Justin before sauntering off.

Mr. Kearnley. Mr. Kearnley indeed. Carefully controlling the urge to laugh in triumph, Justin looked at Tom Kearney, grinned, and then quietly said, "You know, I'm sure he meant to say Kearney."

It was ridiculously easy after that point. When Justin made a few offhand comments about small presses and the attention they could afford to devote to their authors, Kearney looked intrigued, and when Justin spoke a little more intently about the incredibly high standards of Phoenix's in-house copyeditors and designers, he was downright interested. By the time Justin told Kearney that his book would fit perfectly into the list at Phoenix and that it would be their lead title for next fall -- not just one in a very big crowd -- Kearney finally admitted that no, he hadn't quite yet signed a contract with Fitzgerald Random, and that yes, he would definitely be interested in negotiations with Justin and Phoenix Press.

It was then that JC joined them, with timing so perfect it was almost as if he'd been in on the conversation himself. Justin smiled broadly and said, "JC Chasez, I'd like to introduce to you our newest author, Tom Kearney."

For a moment JC gave Justin an electrifying look, his eyes full of admiration and approval, and Justin had a very difficult few seconds as he tried not to overreact, not to let his happiness overrun him.

"Welcome," JC said warmly to Kearney, a devastating smile on his face, then shook his hand. It happened so fast that even later Justin wasn't quite sure exactly how JC had done it, but in less than ten minutes he had somehow set up a meeting, started to negotiate an advance, and brought a surprised, flattered look to Tom Kearney's face, a look that did not dissipate for the rest of the evening. By the time Kearney left them, he was not only glad to be publishing with Phoenix Press, he was proud to be doing so.

"You handled that really, really well," Justin said, and JC smiled in pleasure. Clearly, triumph at work brought out the best in him.

"And so did you, apparently," JC answered, then laughed out loud and very nearly bounced on his heels. "God, I love that -- love reeling people in, love securing deals."

"I know," Justin said a little wistfully, flashing back to their first meeting. He had been on the receiving end of a JC Chasez sales pitch himself.

JC was still in form -- Justin could practically feel the confidence and energy emanating from him. He half expected JC to prowl the room right now, plucking away Fitzgerald Random's authors one by one, and he was on the brink of suggesting that they mingle some more to that exact end when JC leaned toward him and murmured, "So, should we go celebrate?"

Suddenly it was much too hot in the room, and Justin dragged in a deep, ragged breath as he felt excitement start to spread through him. He opened his mouth to speak, met JC's amused, expectant gaze, and then mumbled, "I'd like that a lot."

"Come on, then." JC led him straight toward the exit, but right before they reached it, he paused, shook his head, and then laughed quietly to himself. "Just a minute," he said. "I think I'm going to go say goodbye to Robert Stackhouse first."

"JC, you really --" Justin began, but already JC was striding away from him, graceful and confident. Justin darted a few horrified glances at JC and Robert Stackhouse as they spoke, wondering exactly how JC was delivering the news. When JC returned, Justin shot him a questioning glance, but JC only nodded, murmured, "Later," and then led Justin out to catch a cab.

"Okay," Justin said in the taxi as they headed . . . somewhere, he wasn't quite sure, but he certainly hoped it was JC's apartment. "So what did you say to Stackhouse?"

"Hmm?" JC asked distractedly.

"I said --"

"Oh, Stackhouse." JC grinned to himself. "Nothing, really. I just asked him how he was, chatted him up."

Justin frowned. "You didn't tell him? You didn't rub it in his face, what we did with Kearney?"

"Oh no," JC softly said. "Robert will figure that out tomorrow."

"Jesus," Justin said under his breath and looked out the window, because really, it was clever and cruel -- when Stackhouse did realize what happened, he'd no doubt torture himself with the knowledge that JC had known he'd fucked him over even as they'd shared meaningless small talk. It was strange, ruthless, and very JC.

"Okay," JC said as they pulled in front of an old stone building, then leaned forward and exchanged bills with the taxi driver.

"Mr. Chasez," the doorman said in a welcoming and reverent voice as they approached the building. "Always a pleasure to have you here, sir."

JC nodded at him, then lead a rather sheepish Justin inside. This was obviously not JC's apartment.

"Um, where are we?" he asked.

A look of surprise crossed JC's face, but he quickly recovered and then said, "This is, er, a club I belong to. It'll be less crowded than anyplace else at this hour, so I thought --" He broke off, suddenly looking uncertain, and Justin was fascinated. "I hope that's all right. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, and --"

"Why would I feel uncomfortable?" Justin asked, immediately starting to feel uncomfortable, because what JC had just told him was that this was a posh, exclusive club that Justin would never have gotten into on his own. Well, he was going in tonight, and he deserved to be in

here just as much as everyone else, just as much as JC, for that matter. Justin slowly raised his chin and squared his shoulders.

As they walked through an elegant, understated foyer and past several more employees, each of them sang out greetings to JC in the same voice the valet had used. By the time they reached the bar, Justin's shoulders were tense.

JC leaned over to have a murmured conversation with the bartender, then led Justin through a room full of large, comfortable men in large, comfortable leather chairs and down a hallway lined with several closed doors.

"What's this?"

"Private room," JC said, pulling out his keys and opening one of the doors, gesturing for Justin to step in. He did, and for a moment stood completely still: the room was dark, and he wasn't sure where to step, how to move. He heard JC moving behind him and took a deep breath, waiting anxiously for the warm slide of JC's hands around his waist and a series of the maddening, teasing kisses he knew JC was so adept at.

When the light flicked on, Justin sagged a little in disappointment, then recovered and followed JC across the room to a fireplace in front of which two more leather chairs were placed.

JC gestured to a chair and politely waited for Justin to sit down before joining him -- he was treating Justin very considerately, as a guest, and it was starting to freak Justin out. He glanced around the room, taking in the dark, polished wood and breathing in the comforting smell of leather and furniture polish. When he looked at JC again, he caught his breath: JC was watching him, his mouth curved in a half-smile.

"So how often do you come here?" he asked, coughing a bit to cover his uneasiness.

"I have lunch out in the main dining room with my grandfather twice a month when I'm in town," JC said, stretching a bit, his shirt pulling enticingly against his torso. "But it can get noisy out there, and so I thought it might be nice for the two of us to talk in this room."

Justin glanced around at the bookshelves, the large couch, and the paintings on the wall. It was a perfect place for intimate conversation, and who knew what else? Before Justin could further indulge thoughts of this sort, a soft knock sounded at the door.

Justin had to laugh when he saw the waiter making his way toward them with a bottle of champagne and two slender fluted glasses.

"You seemed to prefer good champagne, so I thought I'd make sure you had some." JC poured Justin a glassful, and then one for himself. "And beyond that, Justin, seriously -- I wanted to offer you congratulations and tell you how pleased I was with your work tonight."

"Oh," Justin said. "Thank you," and then smiled weakly if gratefully as JC lifted his glass to him. This was obviously not a come-on; this was JC being a good boss, JC rewarding a

lower-level employee with a trip to the fancy club. Justin wasn't sure whether to be furious or ashamed.

"Drink," JC said expansively, and Justin did so, drank far too quickly and gulped down the first glass before he knew what he was doing.

"You do like it," JC said, amused, and poured Justin another glass.

"One day I'm going to have bottles and bottles of this in my own house."

JC grinned at him. "Keep going the way you are and that will definitely be the case."

"I -- thank you. Really. It hasn't been -- this transition -- you in the office -- not always easy, and --"

JC laughed. "Stop it, okay? Just sit back and enjoy your drink."

And so Justin did just that, finished a second glass in the middle of a conversation about the upcoming list and then a third one as he proudly told JC about his conversation with Thomas Kearney. He lost track of whether JC was following him drink for drink, but always, it seemed, there was more champagne, and he drank it down each and every time it was offered to him.

By the time their conversation had started to falter, Justin was well and truly toasted, laughing too hard at everything JC said and leaning forward in a ridiculous, embarrassing fashion, getting as close as he could to JC without revealing what he was doing -- he hoped. JC was laughing too, talking quickly and sharply, funny as all hell, and for the millionth time Justin rued deeply the fact that he worked with this man, that he could not move in on him the way he wanted to. He was smart, handsome as all hell, and oh yeah -- so good in bed it made Justin shiver to remember it. JC Chasez was the real thing.

But it was not to be, and so if he breathed in deeply to get a whiff of JC's cologne or reached out and put a hand on JC's arm a couple of times when they were laughing, Justin was also very careful not to touch too long or to look too deeply into JC's dark, inscrutable eyes. That way lay insanity.

"All right," JC finally said, and slowly stood up. "This was fun, Justin. I'm glad we had this chance to talk."

"Me too." Justin reluctantly struggled to stand as well, not at all pleased with JC for bringing the evening to a close so summarily. He chanced a look at his watch. Okay, so it was 11:30, but it still seemed too early for them to part. He hadn't had enough time with JC.

"I'll call us a car," JC said, then smiled and shook his head as Justin stumbled a little behind him. "I hope you won't have a rough morning."

"Such good champagne," Justin breathed and then paused to lean against the wall and looked happily at JC, into his bright, amused eyes.

"And you look so good tonight," he continued in a low voice, not caring if it was too familiar, not caring if it was wrong. "So good, JC."

"Thank you." JC smiled and took a step toward Justin, coming just a little closer than was appropriate, and Justin felt his heart begin to thud against his rib cage. JC was so beautiful it almost hurt to be near him.

"You look rather nice yourself," JC offered, and Justin sighed.

"God, JC, I just -- I look at you every day and it's so hard sometimes, you know?"

"What's hard?" JC asked very quietly, looking intently at him, and Justin straightened up a little bit, trying to read him, trying to figure out what the hell was going on in his mind, what might be possible. He flashed back to the warehouse, to the gentle slide of JC's tongue, the urgent feel of his hands: that had been exquisite, so exquisite; the only wrong thing about it was the fact that it had ended too soon.

And here they were alone again, and Justin thought JC had a question in his eyes, a question Justin knew he wouldn't let himself ask out loud, which was disappointing on many levels. But that didn't mean that Justin couldn't still answer, did it?

"You have no idea how hard it is to be near you and not touch you," he finally said, and felt triumph spread through him as he watched JC flush a little.

"Actually, I think I do." JC's voice was uneven now, so rough Justin almost couldn't hear it, and he was moving closer again, wasn't he? He definitely was, Justin thought deliriously as a rush of anticipation flooded him. He hesitated for just a moment, and then slowly, cautiously placed his hands on JC's hips, gently easing him nearer.

"Justin," JC said in warning, but he didn't stop him, didn't do anything to prevent Justin from leaning in closer and closer, from sniffing at his neck, from kissing the side of his clean-shaven face. Justin was nearly trembling from the strain of moving so deliberately, from being so careful, but it was paying off, it was definitely paying off, he realized as he felt JC slowly start to relax, to lean into him.

"I want to kiss you again," Justin murmured into JC's ear, then gently bit down on the earlobe and very nearly exploded with delight as he felt JC tremble. From there it was a slow, sweet journey as Justin moved delicately down to the soft skin under JC's ear, then along the lovely curve of his jaw, murmuring quietly into JC's warm, fragrant skin as JC breathed even more quickly, as he moved his hands to Justin's waist and gripped tightly.

Finally, Justin was at the corner of JC's mouth, and then, he was there, exactly where he'd longed to be, and JC's lips were soft and welcoming against his. Now it was Justin's turn to tremble as well, because although they were barely touching, he was taut with desire, so full of longing that he wasn't quite sure how he was even managing to stand on his own.

When Justin pressed gently at the crease of JC's mouth with his tongue, JC sighed and opened his mouth, let Justin inside, and it was so perfect then that Justin brought hands up to JC's face, his neck, gently stroking his cheeks with his thumbs, cradling him as he deepened

the kiss. He kissed JC as skillfully as he knew how, and when he finally pulled back a bit, JC's swollen mouth and wild eyes told him that he'd done well.

"This is so not -- but you're driving me insane -- you're --" JC whispered huskily, and then leaned in to bring their mouths together again, and Justin moaned in pleasure as JC began to move his hands, running them hungrily, slowly over Justin's back, then sliding to the front again to move inside his jacket and over the warmth of his skin through his shirt. Earlier in the evening, Justin had taken off his bow tie and unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt -- and now he was deeply grateful that he'd done so, because it allowed JC to slide warm fingers over the base of his neck, to trace his collar bones with his thumbs, and then to start to follow the path his fingers had taken with his mouth.

Justin tilted his head back into the wall and gulped for air as JC licked a slow, hot line down the side of his neck, then reached out desperately and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him up again.

"Justin," JC breathed before kissing him again, and then murmured something hungry and hot and indecipherable as Justin opened his legs and drew JC closer, eased him into exactly the right spot and then shuddered delightedly against him as JC began to slowly rock his hips forward, to bring them even closer together. It was so hot and so frustrating, intermittent flashes of perfect sensation followed by more slow, deep kissing, and JC could probably keep this up all night, this gentle teasing alternating with slow, gradual trips to a much happier place. And Justin would have been more than happy to do that were it not for the even more pressing need building in him, a need so strong and so fierce he was afraid it was going to swallow up the world if he didn't do something about it soon.

When Justin slid his hand over the front of JC's pants, he drew in his breath but then pressed forward eagerly, almost desperately, his mouth moving hungrily at the base of Justin's neck as Justin stroked him, his hands bracketing Justin's hips like a vise. When Justin murmured quietly to him, telling him how beautiful he was, how much he wanted him, how good he was going to make him feel, JC gasped and moved even more frenziedly with him. It was so perfect, JC straining into him, toward him, doing anything he could to get closer, and Justin closed his eyes and felt perfect happiness taking over him. He had just moved his hand to the waist of JC's pants, had just felt the muscles of JC's abdomen move responsively against the back of his hand, when a knock on the door shocked both of them into immobility.

"Fuck!" JC fiercely said and moved back so quickly that Justin very nearly laughed as the door slowly began to open and their waiter came in once more. He seemed to know immediately that he'd interrupted something -- and if Justin's own face were as flushed and his own mouth as swollen as JC's, Justin could tell exactly why. They looked like a pair of guilty, love struck teenagers, and once again, Justin felt an almost unbearable urge to laugh.

"Sorry, I, did you want more to drink?" the waiter haltingly asked, and Justin almost felt pity for him as he watched JC's eyes cut into him, as he saw the furious expression on his face.

"No thank you," he said curtly, "but we will need two cars, one for each of us. Knock again when they arrive."

The waiter disappeared with a final "yes sir," leaving Justin and JC alone once more.

"Two cars?" Justin said softly, trying to hide the disappointment he felt. "Wouldn't one do just as well?"

"Two makes more sense since we're going to different parts of the city." JC spoke quietly but firmly, and it was amazing, Justin thought, amazing how quickly he snapped in and out of intense emotional states, amazing how calm and collected he now seemed when only a few moments ago he'd been rubbing heatedly into Justin's hand, had been practically panting into his neck. Justin frowned. Could he really have switched off just like that?

"Well, I think one would do." Justin spoke as slowly and sweetly as he could, and JC rewarded him by flushing slightly and shifting awkwardly from one foot to the next. "We're drunk, remember? Who's to say you couldn't take me to your place to sober up, and who's to say what might happen after that? I know I wouldn't remember it, and you -- well, you could just push it out of your mind afterward, just like you always try to do."

Justin very nearly smiled as he watched the struggle on JC's face -- he was somewhere between temptation and annoyance, and it was difficult to tell which was winning.

"I want you to believe me when I say that I'm very, very appreciative of your offer," JC finally, carefully said after a long, electric pause, and Justin felt an explosion of embarrassment and disappointment in his chest.

"But it's probably better that we not -- that I not let myself lose control any further tonight," JC finished up, and now he almost sounded miserable. "I can't -- this behavior -- I'm your boss, Justin, and I need to leave you alone, need to be consistent with you."

Justin rolled his eyes. "It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

JC reddened even further. "Truly, I'm sorry. There's nothing more annoying than mixed messages, and I know I've been giving you a lot of them lately. But you just -- you --" He broke off and sighed. "It's very hard, all right?"

"Look -- it's not like I just asked you to marry me," Justin said, feeling distant pleasure as he watched JC flinch. "It's just -- you're receptive and I'm receptive and we're both turned on, and I -- we -- it'll be so good, JC, just like before, and so I don't see why we can't just --"

"I'm sorry, Justin, but the answer is no," JC calmly said.

"Jesus," Justin spat out in disgust, then straightened up and began to button up his shirt again, running fingers through his curls, trying to compose himself and hide the hurt he felt. JC had turned down everything he'd offered; JC was trying as hard as he could not to want anything from him, was going to put all of his considerable energy and focus into making sure nothing could happen between them.

It was so, so infuriating. Justin frowned and stared unhappily at him, and then made a silent promise to himself. JC wasn't going to get away with that for much longer -- not if he could help it.

June

June

"Justin!" Joey said, beckoning him into his office, his face breaking into a huge grin. "You're not gonna believe this, absolutely not --"

"What happened?" Justin asked, stepping inside, clearing the chair of unread manuscripts, and taking a seat.

"My book -- the one on the Chantilly codex, you know, the one by that assistant professor at UCLA? It just won the Bainton prize in musicology!" Joey was obviously delighted, and the light of his smile seemed to fill the room. "And that's huge, Justin -- it's really huge, it's such a great, great honor."

"Hey, congratulations!" Justin reached out to shake Joey's hand and was pulled across the top of the desk into a quick, rough hug. It was impossible not to share Joey's enthusiasm, impossible not to laugh and smile in response. "I don't know what the fuck the Chantilly codex is, but that sounds really great, Joey -- really great. You brought us the right one, just like always."

It was true. Joey's books might not have attracted many readers or much money, but they won all sorts of awards.

"Yeah," Joey said in satisfaction. "See, I knew from the start, knew it even when I read the proposal that this was gonna be big. Sometimes it just clicks, you know?"

"For the right person it does, for the kind of person who knows what to look for." Justin grinned again. "So is there a big cash prize or something? Do we get to take a trip to Hawaii?"

"Money?" Joey asked incredulously. "Not hardly. I mean, she gets about five hundred bucks, but that's really not what this award is about. This is about honoring the scholarship."

"Well, that's fabulous," Justin said, immediately dismissing his half-formed idea that they talk to marketing about taking out a congratulatory ad in some trade papers. The award was honor enough in itself -- who cared if the book didn't sell ten thousand copies?

"God, I needed this." Joey leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I don't know if you've noticed, Justin, but it's been a little rough for me around here lately."

"I, yeah. Yeah." Justin wasn't quite sure how to respond.

"I mean, what with Jackass Chasez roaming the halls looking for every opportunity he gets to yell at me about ISBN numbers and money, I'd actually almost started to hate coming to

work." Joey looked utterly miserable.

"Hey," Justin said as an uncomfortable mixture of sympathy for Joey and loyalty to JC filled his mind. "You're -- it's gonna be okay, Joey, I know it is. Just -- do what you do best and the rest will work itself out. I know it will."

"Yeah." Joey shook his head. "You know, I don't know if I ever told you how sorry I am about you getting stuck in the warehouse fixing that ISBN thing. That day was just -- well, I had to get out of here early, had to pick up Bri at daycare and get some groceries for dinner, and so I took off, I just took off. I really wish I wouldn't have."

"Don't say another word about it." Justin said, then fell silent as he flashed back to JC's angry words in the warehouse. "But Joey, do remember to show that stuff to me when cover comps come by, okay? Cause if I don't see it, then I can't catch it, and if I don't do that, then JC comes down on both of us."

"Right, yeah," Joey said absently, and then laughed out loud. "The Bainton prize! That really makes my day. I oughta -- hey -- you wanna come over for dinner tonight, maybe celebrate a little bit with me and Kelly?"

"I'd love to, but I --" Justin paused. How to tell Joey that he needed to be at work instead -- that actually, both of them should be? "I kind of have some things to get done -- you know. What with the formal list-setting meeting coming up and all."

"Oh," Joey said, and laughed. "Right. Forgot about how much you obsess over those meetings."

Justin spoke very carefully. "You, uh. You've got your books, right? And your manuscripts are in house? I think . . . I think JC's going to expect a lot from us at this meeting. He really wants to get a good sense of what'll end up on the list."

"You worry too much, Justin -- always have." Joey grinned at him. "I'll be just fine."

"Yeah," Justin said, less than convinced.

"And anyway, even if you do work late, I still don't see why you can't have dinner with us," Joey added. "I know you're not stupid enough to stay here past eight, so why don't you show up at my place between then and eight thirty? C'mon -- you know how much Briahna loves you, and Kelly, of course, will want to hear all about your exciting love life."

Love life? It had been a while ago now, but Justin still thought of kissing JC in the private room at the club, of JC's hands on him, of how incredible it had been to be close to him again. It seemed that JC knew almost by instinct exactly how to touch him, knew exactly what Justin needed, and Justin was beginning to figure out the same about JC. Justin longed to try it all over again, to see what else he could learn.

"Uh," he said tentatively, his capacity for logical thought having left him.

Joey laughed. "I'm kidding you -- you know I am. But come, all right? It'll be lots of fun, I promise."

Justin grinned. "You know, I think I will," he said. "I need to relax, need to get away from this place, need to stop thinking so much about work." He needed to stop thinking so much about JC, too.

"Exactly." Joey's voice was full of satisfaction as he turned to his phone. "Let me just call Kelly to confirm, and I'll get back to you later on."

"Great -- that's really great." As Justin got up to leave, a surge of affection for Joey filled him. No matter what anyone thought, Joey was a great guy -- and an asset to the press.

As he walked back to his office, Justin noticed JC descending the last few steps of the spiral staircase, his eyes narrowed and his mouth in a thin, grim line. He looked furious, and for a moment Justin considered trying to get away from him altogether, to avoid any sort of contact, because judging from the look on his face, no conversation with him at this point could possibly be good. It was too late to escape without being obvious, though, so Justin steeled himself and waited calmly for the encounter. Again, thoughts of kissing JC, of being kissed by JC, of touching JC, assailed his mind, and to his dismay, Justin was breathing shallowly by the time the two of them came face to face.

"Hey," Justin quietly offered.

JC didn't bother to return the greeting. "He's in there, right?" he calmly asked, inclining his head toward Joey's office.

By now Justin knew JC well enough to know that JC used that eerily controlled voice only when he was very, very angry about something, and as he answered, anxiety seized him. "Um, yeah, he is. He's actually -- one of his books just won a big award today. It's really, really good news."

"Really? How nice." JC's voice was almost completely devoid of interest as he briskly moved on, coming to Joey's door, knocking once, and then saying, "Hi, Joey. Let's talk," before firmly closing it behind him.

Justin moved on unsteady legs back to his office and sat uncertainly at his computer, fretting. Could Joey have made another big mistake? Was there anything new that might have been messed up? In a panic, Justin checked his e-mails from the warehouse indicating which new shipments had arrived -- no problems there. Then he looked carefully at his calendar: could a meeting have been missed? Was there something the music department should have had done? Nothing presented itself here, either, and Justin sat back and brooded, his mind working overtime as he puzzled it over.

When Justin realized he wasn't going to be able to figure out what was going on, he felt awful, but there wasn't anything he could do about it now. With a sigh, he turned to some readers' reports he'd just received for a manuscript he was interested in and started to compose a letter to the author about them. It was a complicated manuscript on jazz and heroin use, and the reviews had been sharply divided. Time got away from him as he tried to

sort it all out, and when he looked up again, more than half an hour had passed since JC had first entered Joey's office. Surely they had to be done by now.

Justin slowly got up and headed down the hallway only to find that the door to Joey's office was still shut. After surreptitiously looking up and down the hallway to make sure he was alone, Justin peered carefully through the long, narrow strip of glass at the side of the door, and then inhaled sharply as he locked glances with JC -- JC, who was just about to leave the office. The door swung open too quickly for Justin to move away, and then JC was looking closely, curiously at him, his eyes keen. Further back in the room, Joey was slamming things around, his face red and his gestures angry and careless.

"Is there something I can help you with?" JC asked pointedly, and Justin very nearly groaned out loud. He could not possibly have had worse timing.

"No, I -- I'm just here to see Joey," he faltered.

"Joey's busy right now," JC told him. "I think you'd better come back later."

"Right," Justin said as the tension in him grew, and then hurried away from JC, away from Joey, and toward the kitchen. Once there, he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, twisted it open, then tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and took several deep swallows. When he was finished, he lowered his head and gasped, trying to collect himself, and then slowly lifted his eyes to see JC watching him from the doorway of the kitchen.

"You all right?" JC carefully asked, and Justin felt himself becoming flustered, and then got angry with himself because of that. And for that matter, he was angry at JC, too.

"Yeah, really great, JC. I've got so much to do I can hardly see straight, and you're breathing down my boss's neck and making his life hell. What could possibly be better?"

"Well, for one thing your director could tell you that it's inappropriate for you to speculate about his dealings with other employees," JC said lightning quick, his voice sharp.

"C'mon, JC," Justin said. "He's a great editor -- if you'd just let yourself see it, you'd realize exactly how significant his contributions to this place have been. And I don't know what's gone on between the two of you, but if you'd just talk it out --"

JC took three steps across the room until he was standing very close to Justin, and then spoke in a low, dangerous tone. "Since you don't seem to be getting it, let me reinforce my point. It's none of your business what I talk to Joey about, none of your business how I choose to conduct myself with any other employee here. You need to step back, Justin."

"Okay, you're right about that," Justin said immediately, because JC was, and then tried not to flinch as JC continued to glare at him. "But I still think --"

"Justin," JC warned, and then Justin took a few steps back in a literal sense.

"I just wish you'd be a little nicer to him," Justin miserably said, giving up entirely on official business speak. "That's all."

JC looked hard at him for a moment, then spoke in an equally quiet voice. "Look -- I know this means a lot to you, and I respect that, but again, this simply isn't a conversation we can have. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Okay, yeah," Justin admitted, and lowered his head, staring unhappily at the floor. Why was everything such a damn mess?

"Look -- I'll see you later," JC said, and when Justin lifted his head to wave goodbye at him, he was treated to a steady, curious, almost puzzled gaze, which was more than a little unsettling. JC probably thought he was the most unprofessional person on the planet.

"Bye," Justin said, and then tried -- and failed -- not to watch JC as he walked away from him.

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"Hey," Joey said later in the day, knocking once on Justin's half-open door and stepping into his office. "Would it be all right if we rescheduled our dinner for another time? There's some stuff I suddenly need to get finished, and I --"

"Yeah," Justin said. "That's perfectly all right, absolutely."

"Thanks, J." Joey gave him a tired smile.

"Um. This stuff you have to get done. Do you want any help with it?"

Joey laughed to himself, shaking his head. "You know, Justin, I probably could use some, but I seem to have been instructed not to consult with you on this, so I guess I'll be flying solo."

"Oh." Justin was annoyed with JC all over again. "Look -- I'm really sorry. Whatever happened between you two, I --"

"It's got absolutely nothing to do with you, Justin, so don't even worry about it." Joey leaned over the desk, looked seriously and earnestly at Justin. "And listen to me, because I mean this: I need you -- I want you to have a good working relationship with Chasez no matter what, all right? The very worst thing that could happen here would be for my disagreements with him to affect you or your career."

"Oh Joey, it's not -- I won't --" Justin guiltily began, then shut up as Joey waved for him to be quiet.

"All right, I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Joey was leaving already? Justin took a deep breath and tried very, very had not to look at the clock on the wall. "I, uh. You're leaving now?"

Joey sighed. "I'm gonna work at home for a while. I just -- I can't stand to be in this place one minute longer."

"Okay," Justin murmured, and felt awful all over again. "Look -- tomorrow'll be better, okay?"

"It had damn well better be," Joey said, and then slowly ambled off.

~ ~ ~ ~

Friday morning Justin pulled his glasses off and rubbed his eyes tiredly. This manuscript -- well, it wasn't crap, exactly, but the manuscript editorial department was going to have a conniption fit when they saw it. It was a good, solid book, but wow, it was going to need a lot of work if it was going to be ready for the fall list. And the author, he thought morosely, was the biggest, most high-maintenance pain in the ass he'd ever met.

He stood up and stretched long and hard, sighing as he felt his back creak. The manuscript and its author were giving him a headache. He needed caffeine.

After sitting at his desk hunched over his work all morning he was glad to take a walk to the kitchen. Justin paused to speak to his assistant and offered to bring him a soda, then headed down the long hallway.

He hadn't gone far when Chris exploded out of a side hallway and fell into step beside him. "Mr. Justin Timberlake. Precisely the man I was looking for." Chris's tone was rich with satisfaction and Justin eyed him suspiciously as he mentally raced through everything he owed the art department, looking for something he'd missed.

"Don't even try to scare me," he finally said with as much confidence as he could muster. "I'm all caught up."

"Justin," Chris said with mock pain. "You seem to think that the only time I come looking for you is when I want to bust your balls about something. I'm hurt."

"Oh, like I should trust you," Justin said sarcastically, although it was impossible not to smile. "Why are you looking for me, then?"

They turned a corner, walking down a long hall that led past the conference room. Justin glanced over the teeming activity and cubicle walls and into the conference room window as they approached, and then almost tripped over his own feet as he looked directly into JC's sharp, blue-green eyes. He was in a meeting full of strangers but watching Justin intently through the glass from his position at the head of the table, and something about the look in his eyes made Justin gulp hard and flush with heat. The bustle of the press and Chris's voice faded away. Justin managed to keep moving forward, but for a long, breathless moment he was unable to tear his eyes away from JC's.

JC tightened his lips into a thin, tense line and directed his eyes back to the speaker, just as Chris's hand on his elbow jerked Justin back to himself. He realized with horror that he had narrowly missed knocking himself unconscious by walking into an open door.

He swore, and heaved a deep breath over Chris's laughter. Just that morning Justin had given himself a stern lecture as a result of a stupid, foolish daydream about JC, and the realization

that he'd had far too many of those since the night of the Fitzgerald Random party.

He simply had to get a grip, Justin told himself. He had to stop losing his mind every time he looked at JC. It was time to get over this stupid crush and move the fuck on. Jesus.

" . . . and really, I thought you'd be pleased about it, not try to commit suicide right here in the hallway," Chris was saying, and Justin tuned in with a start as they entered the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Chris, I totally missed that. What were you saying?"

Chris eyed him carefully, his dark eyes dancing with mischief. "Well, shit, Justin. I've been talking pretty much nonstop all the way down the hall," he informed him. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Justin reached into the refrigerator and grabbed a can of soda. He opened it, eyeing Chris cautiously. The last time Chris had ambushed him in the press's kitchen he'd ended up with diet soda all over the front of his favorite green shirt. "Uh, the last thing I remember was wondering why you'd come looking for me." He took a long and grateful gulp from the cold can. His throat was dry. "And if I'd missed a deadline or something."

Chris nodded with mock seriousness. "Wow, okay. So you missed, like, everything I said. Good to know that you care so much about what the art department has to contribute to your list, Justin. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

Justin blinked at him, but Chris didn't appear to be really upset. In fact, he was grinning and rubbing his hands together in a pleased way. "Sorry," Justin said, taking another can of soda for his assistant and offering one to Chris with a raised eyebrow. "I was sort of . . ."

"Distracted," Chris supplied helpfully, and laughed out loud when Justin sighed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I noticed that. But seriously Justin -- and believe me, this is a topic of great seriousness -- my real reason for seeking you out is to ask you about the game."

Justin was suddenly alert. Basketball was certainly a serious topic. "You mean the playoff game tonight," he said, and added loftily, "the one the Knicks are going to win."

Chris burst into a delighted grin. "That's exactly what I was hoping you were going to say," he said. "Because we're going to the game tonight, and there's an extra ticket. For you." He waggled his eyebrows and his grin, if anything, grew. "Courtside."

Justin gaped at him for a moment. "No fucking way," he breathed reverently. Courtside tickets for a playoff basketball game, for the game that had been sold out forever, for the game that was making scalpers rich. He felt exultation start to rise; then his face fell.

"Oh god," he said regretfully. "I wish I could, Chris, I really do, but I just don't have that kind of money. Especially at this time of the month. There's no way I can afford a ticket like this."

"No worries," Chris said cheerfully. "JC's brother got stuck in Paris or something, and can't make it, so we have an extra. It won't cost you anything."

Justin froze at the mention of JC's name, the can of soda lifted halfway to his mouth as Chris watched him with an almost unholy glee. "Center court, Justin," he said slyly. "Best seats in the house." He smirked evilly. "Unless you'd rather, you know, watch it on television with the rest of the civilized world."

"No!" Justin exclaimed. "No, it's just, are you sure it's okay? I mean, I can't believe JC doesn't have someone else that he'd rather give the ticket to."

Chris shrugged. "Who cares? JC gets his own way far too often as it is. I want to sit with someone who's going to be rooting for the proper team."

"Well, if you're sure he won't mind," Justin said slowly. He set his soda down on the counter; his hand was shaking as his mind stuttered and raced.

This was not a good idea. Justin replayed the almost dismayed expression in JC's eyes and the way he had trembled against Justin's hands in the dim, quiet elegance of the club's private room, and started to feel something curiously like guilt. It seemed that it might be getting increasingly difficult for JC to be around him, and almost against his will Justin felt sympathy stir. Yes, he felt frustration and irritation and a desire that simmered constantly and sparked to life every time Justin thought about JC, but there was also empathy, and oddly enough, respect. JC was exerting his considerable will toward not getting involved with Justin. He'd decided that doing such a thing would be wrong, and as much as Justin didn't like it, he had to admit that JC had a point. Sleeping with a co-worker -- much less a boss -- was never a smart idea.

He should not accept this ticket. He really shouldn't, but the thought of going to such an event with JC -- a sporting event outside the realm of work -- was far too seductive to pass up. Justin gulped hard and forced his voice to work. "If you're sure, I'd . . . Oh shit. Chris," he said as the excitement bloomed in his stomach and burst out in a huge grin. "Fuck, man, you know I'd love to go. I mean, god, the *playoffs*."

Chris's grin was just as big. "Well, then, consider it done. Game's at eight-thirty but traffic is going to be a bitch, so we'll leave from here, right?" He slapped Justin's arm and headed for the door of the kitchen. "Courtsiiiiiiide," he sang over his shoulder, and disappeared down the hall.

Left alone, Justin slid on to a stool and leaned against the counter for a moment. The game, a playoff game, best seats in the house and oh my god sitting there beside JC. Just as his sympathy for the situation JC was in had overcome his frustration and determination. Just as he'd given it all up as a hopeless cause. The timing couldn't be worse, but nevertheless excitement sang through his body. It sounded like heaven. It also sounded like hell. Jesus, could he handle this?

He took a deep breath and picked up his soda cans, heading back to his office. Of course you can handle it, he told himself sternly. It's the hottest ticket in town, the best seats in the house, and you're going to be there watching instead of sitting in front of a television. There, with JC, he thought, and felt another dismaying flush of heat as he remembered the last time they'd been alone together. The night of the Fitzgerald Random party. The night of the private room at the club.

But that particular encounter had been an aberration, brought on by alcohol and unique circumstances. And although JC had been receptive at the time (more than receptive, Justin thought, and shivered again), since that night he had treated Justin with the same polite and impersonal detachment he used with everyone else. Things were different now, he told himself firmly. And yes, considering the fact that they were working together, that was for the best.

And it really was a shame, but sometimes that was just the way things worked out. Sure, JC was hot. Criminally hot. Painfully, excruciatingly sexy with his lean body and sharp blue eyes and the way his face crinkled up when he smiled for real. But JC was also a repressed, cold-hearted bastard, capable of turning off his emotions with ruthless efficiency. In all seriousness, Justin really didn't want to get involved with someone like that. Despite the overwhelming attraction Justin felt for JC and his near-certainty that on some level it was returned, it wasn't going to happen.

All he had to do, he thought with a wry smile, was to keep away from the alcohol tonight, and do what he could to keep from launching himself at JC again if they happened to find themselves alone. Which wouldn't be likely, not in an arena packed to the gills with sports fans. Self-control, Justin reminded himself firmly. He could do this, he could totally do this.

Justin automatically took the long way back to his office to keep from once more passing the conference room where JC was holding his meeting. Then he realized what he was doing and sighed with irritation. This is ridiculous, he told himself. Get back to your office and do your work. Think about basketball. Stop obsessing about the man. Almost defiantly he reversed direction and walked down the main hallway, head high.

But the conference room was now empty and Justin paused for a moment, chewing his lip. Did JC even know that Chris had invited him, or that he had promised Justin the ticket meant for JC's brother? Chris was capricious and volatile and sometimes forgetful; JC might have no idea that he'd even invited Justin to the game. And, Justin admitted to himself, given the way their last private encounter had gone, it was more than possible that JC wouldn't be all that pleased about it. It would be really unfair not to let him know, not to give JC the opportunity to refuse.

Before he could change his mind, Justin reversed direction again and jogged up the spiral stairs to the executive level. JC's assistant was not at his desk, but JC's door was ajar and Justin peered in before tapping quietly.

"Come in," JC said absently. He didn't look up as Justin edged through the doorway and hesitated there. "One moment," he muttered, his attention on the papers in front of him, and Justin took that moment to study him closely.

His jacket was off, but his shirt was unwrinkled and pristine, his tie neatly knotted. His hair, his dark and wildly curling hair, was the only thing about him not neatly buttoned down. JC always wore his hair a little longer than a strict business code dictated, and Justin loved it, he fucking loved JC's hair, remembered vividly the cool and silky feel of it in his fingers, against his face, his chest, his belly, remembered JC shaking sweaty strands from his face when he was naked and braced over Justin on his bed, moving deep inside Justin's body, the

way his eyes slid closed as he sank his teeth into that full lower lip and fought for control while Justin had writhed and begged beneath him . . .

"Justin?" JC's voice was perfectly businesslike and polite but as Justin stared blankly at him there was something in the depths of those blue eyes that said he knew exactly where Justin's thoughts had been just a moment before. He glanced at the two soda cans in Justin's hands and his eyebrows went up a little. "Is one of those for me?"

Justin looked blankly at the cans in his hand and shook his head. "Oh. No, I was just on my way . . ." He set them down on the credenza and wiped the condensation from his hands. JC watched him curiously.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes," Justin answered immediately. "I mean, no. I mean, I just wanted to make sure . . ." JC's lips were twitching just the slightest bit and Justin stopped and took a deep breath, rolling his eyes. "Jesus," he muttered. "Okay, what I wanted to say was that I just ran into Chris in the hallway, and he offered me your extra ticket to the game tonight." He paused as JC's eyebrows went up and he slowly set his pen down, leaning back in his chair. "I just, you know, wanted to make sure you knew. That he invited me."

"I didn't," JC said simply and Justin shoved his hands into his pockets, balling them into fists.

"I didn't think you did," he muttered, and took a deep breath. "You know," he continued, dropping his voice. "If you'd prefer I not accept that ticket, I totally would understa . . ."

"Do you like basketball, Justin?" JC asked with interest, his eyes focused intently on Justin's face. He tried not to squirm under his regard.

"I do," he replied. "Um, a lot. Really, really a lot."

JC smiled a little, making Justin's heart skip. "I bet you play, don't you," he murmured. "I bet you're pretty good at it, too."

Justin nodded silently, unable to trust his voice.

"And I would bet that you're a big Knicks fan," JC finished up and now he was grinning, the real one, the one that made his face light up and his eyes squint. "Chris wouldn't have invited you if you weren't."

"Since I was a boy," Justin agreed, and found himself smiling as JC laughed.

"Well, it'll be an interesting game, then," JC said slyly. "I come from three generations of die-hard Lakers fans, so we'll just have to see how this goes."

Justin's heart felt immensely lighter than it had when he'd entered JC's office. For a moment all his carefully marshaled defenses trembled and he almost felt dizzy -- JC wasn't unhappy that Justin would be coming to the game with them; he wasn't looking for a way to avoid it. JC wasn't holding the Joey incidents against him, and he wasn't trying to avoid him, Justin thought as anticipation started to sparkle through his body.

Relief and excitement made him reckless. "So, I was thinking," Justin started, and then paused to take a quick, deep breath. "I'm really grateful for the ticket, first of all. Thank you so much."

"Thank Chris," JC suggested, still smiling lazily at Justin in a way that made his palms sweat. "He's the one who invited you."

"I will. I did," Justin said, and now JC was looking at him very, very intently and Justin fought not to fidget. "I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner first," he said almost formally, and watched JC's eyes sharpen. "To thank you for the ticket," he added hastily. "And, also, I kind of owe you a dinner."

There was a brief silence as they stared at each other. "You don't owe me a thing, Justin," JC finally said in a low and silky voice that sent fissions of sensation down Justin's spine. "But how very nice of you to offer."

Justin clenched his hands into fists, deep inside his pockets. Against all his better judgments, he suddenly wanted this so badly he could taste it, and if it meant flirting a little bit, well, two could play that game. He shifted his weight and cocked a hip, and was rewarded as he caught JC's eyes moving rapidly down his body and up again. "I'm going to have to insist," he said politely, looking directly into JC's eyes and trying his best smile. "I do owe you a dinner, and the ticket to the game, well, that's just too kind." He smiled wider and felt a cautious triumph when he saw JC take a quick breath and blink rapidly. "Wherever you -- and Chris -- want to go. What do you say?"

JC rose slowly from his chair and stepped easily around until he was standing in front of the desk, face to face with Justin. He leaned back against the desk and braced his arms against it. Justin's breath hitched and his eyes slid involuntarily down the lean length of JC's body, the cream colored shirt, the perfectly fitted slacks, the leather belt. He was suddenly so close, almost close enough to reach out and touch and Justin's hands were sweating and god, had he really just been thinking that two could play this game? He was so fucking out of his league. He gulped desperately as JC shifted his weight and smiled at him.

"I think it'll just be you and I, Justin," he said, his voice very quiet. "Chris has some stuff he has to finish up here, and he's planning on going directly to the arena." He cocked his head, his eyes bright on Justin's face. "Of course, if that's a problem in any way . . ."

He would not blush, Justin told himself firmly. He absolutely would not. "Of course not," he replied easily, although his mouth felt as dry as the Sahara. "Where do you want to go?"

JC shrugged and Justin was gratified to see him a little at a loss. "You know, it's really not necessary for you to buy dinner. We could just get hot dogs at the arena," JC suggested.

Justin eyed him levelly. "Please. As if you would eat hot dogs for dinner," he repeated flatly. "Do not insult me."

JC smiled at him, acknowledging the point. "Okay then. There's an Italian place just a couple of blocks from the arena. Nothing too fancy, so we won't be overdressed for the game. How does that sound?"

Justin released a breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding, and nodded with relief and what felt suspiciously like triumph. "That sounds good," he said, and smiled again. "What time are we leaving?"

JC glanced at his watch. "Let’s leave early. Traffic across town will be awful," he mused. "How about 5:00?"

"I’ll meet you in the lobby," Justin said, and with what he hoped was a casual and friendly nod, he grabbed his soda cans and made his exit. He felt JC’s eyes on his back all the way to the door.

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Justin took a long lunch and grabbed a cab for a lightning trip home. He needed a change of clothes -- his neat suit and tie were fine for the office, but he felt very overdressed for a casual dinner and a basketball game. As he pawed frantically through his closet he was aware that he was far too concerned about what he was going to wear, and he scolded himself for thinking of this evening like a date. It was not a date, no matter how JC looked at him, no matter how silky and suggestive his voice could be.

The important thing to remember, Justin reminded himself for the hundredth time as he considered and discarded clothing, was that JC was a natural tease. JC flirted without even realizing it most of the time, and it was essential that Justin accept that it wasn’t anything personal. They worked together, they sometimes ran into each other in the park on Saturday mornings, they both liked basketball. They could be friends, they could have dinner and watch a game and enjoy themselves without both of them worrying about whether or not Justin was going to be able to keep his hands to himself. It shouldn’t even be an issue.

Still, he couldn’t keep himself from feeling pleased as he tossed worn jeans and a thin black sweater into a zippered gym bag. He knew he looked good in these clothes, and he was going to be able to pull it off without looking like he’d made any sort of special effort to do so. Perfect.

He also stopped at the ATM down the street from his office and withdrew all the cash he could safely pull without endangering his still-uncashed rent check. JC had said the Italian restaurant he had in mind was reasonable, but who knew what constituted "reasonable" to JC? It didn’t hurt to be prepared, Justin thought. It was worth going without groceries for the next ten days.

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Later that evening Justin stepped outside the restaurant and took a long, slow, deep breath. He felt over-adrenalized, confusion and restraint battling with excitement, and the looming basketball playoff game wasn't the only cause. No, the cause was the man walking out of the restaurant beside him. Justin glanced at JC as they fell into step and began the short walk to the arena, just in time to see JC glance quickly away, a small smile on his lips. Justin’s heart thudded painfully in his chest and he took another deep breath, dragging his eyes away only with effort.

Justin had arrived in the lobby at five minutes to 5:00 and found JC already there and waiting for him. He'd changed into casual clothing as well, and the sight of JC in jeans and a dark blue shirt that made his eyes startlingly bright caused Justin to sigh in helpless appreciation as he'd crossed the lobby. JC's smile had been almost as bright as his eyes; he was obviously in a fine mood. JC, Justin decided, must be quite a basketball fan.

Justin had assumed that they would take a taxi and he'd hesitated when JC had indicated the chauffeured black Suburban double-parked at the curb outside of the building. "I don't want to hassle with the traffic," JC had said without apology, "and this way we won't have to deal with trying to get a cab after the game."

A cab, JC had said. Not *cabs*, but a *cab*. And it probably didn't mean a thing, but he'd said it in a low and lazy tone that had caused fire to lick up and down Justin's spine, and supplied a rush of disjointed mental images, most of which included JC naked and with his hands and gorgeous mouth all over Justin's body. Jesus, how did he do that? Without even trying? Justin took a deep breath and suppressed a shiver.

He'd composed himself as he'd nodded nonchalantly and slid into the vehicle. He'd tried to distract himself by wondering what keeping a car and driver like this at one's beck and call actually cost, but then JC slid into the backseat beside him with a brilliant smile. His blue-green eyes flickered over Justin's form with a rueful sort of admiration and as Justin grinned back he impulsively decided that just for tonight he was not going to worry about the fact that JC was his boss. Even though this was most emphatically not a date, he was going to have dinner and see a playoff game in the company of the most compelling man he'd ever met, and he was going to enjoy himself.

And he was, he thought with a smile as he and JC negotiated the crowded sidewalks outside Madison Square Garden. Dinner had been at a small restaurant discreetly tucked into a side street. It hadn't looked too imposing from the outside, but inside it was exquisite: small, private tables, intimate lighting, and an exclusive sort of menu with prices that made Justin blink in surprise. And then JC had picked up the wine list, perusing it with what could only have been termed a purr of anticipation. He'd picked out something perfect and pricey, causing Justin to worriedly review the amount of cash in his wallet. But the wine had been amazing and the food excellent; the manicotti had melted in his mouth and JC had spoken highly of his cannelloni. Without a doubt it was the best Italian food that Justin had tasted in New York City.

And JC had been a perfect dinner companion, lounging a little in his chair between courses, utterly at ease as he'd asked Justin's opinion on basketball in general and the upcoming game in particular. He'd laughed, and smiled, and leaned forward and made eye contact in ways that had set Justin's pulse racing. He'd asked interested questions about Justin's childhood, eliciting information about the high school team Justin had played on that had just missed the Tennessee state basketball championships, and even the secret hope Justin had harbored as a teenager that he would grow tall enough to have a shot at a college scholarship.

And JC had been relaxed when Justin had countered these questions with his own, describing his teenage years at the very exclusive boarding school, how he'd given up most sports by his

sophomore year as his studies had grown more demanding. "I still love to watch, though," JC had added, his eyes bright as he'd sipped his wine, and Justin had smiled back at him.

"Well, we should have plenty to see tonight," Justin had replied, and then blushed as JC's smile changed, became sharper.

"Here's to that," JC had murmured.

It wasn't a date, Justin kept telling himself fiercely. It wasn't. JC had turned him down too many times for Justin to believe the flirting was real. Justin reminded himself that flirting came naturally to JC, that he was no more flirting with Justin than he was with the maitre d', who'd been on the receiving end of a perfectly brilliant smile when he'd greeted them at the door, or the wine steward, who seemed to know JC personally, or their waiter, with whom JC had had a detailed discussion about the preparation of his cannelloni. JC had a way of making whomever he was speaking with aware that they were the subject of his undivided attention, and when he was in a good mood, like now, he had an amazing ability to establish rapport. Justin reminded himself that he must not read too much into it.

But he couldn't keep his spirits from soaring. Just looking at JC made him happy and hungry; having JC look back at him with those slow smiles made Justin feel like he could fly.

They'd lingered over dinner, talking easily and laughing, and it wasn't until JC sighed with regret and glanced at his watch that their waiter brought the bill. Justin's mood was only slightly dimmed by its delivery -- he'd expected JC to protest his picking it up and he had, but he'd given in gracefully and had, thank god, been looking out the window at the passing crowd when Justin's eyes landed on the total neatly printed at the bottom.

It was more than the cash Justin had in his wallet, and he'd eased his credit card into the leather folder with a silent and fervent prayer that it wouldn't be declined. Surely his last payment had been credited by now; he knew he was dangerously close to his limit but if he paid the tip in cash and didn't include it in the amount to be charged it should be okay . . .

"Justin?" JC voice was concerned, and Justin looked up as the bill was taken away. "Is there something wrong?"

"Wrong?" Justin parroted. "No, not at all." He forced an easy smile to his face and took a long drink of cold water. "Why do you ask?"

JC's eyes were shrewd and sharp on his face; he seemed to be debating whether or not to speak. Justin prayed desperately that his card would not be declined -- he could only play this off if it wasn't.

JC seemed to come to a decision. "Never mind," he said quietly, and asked Justin his opinion on the Knicks' starting point guard. A moment later the bill came back -- accepted, thank *god* -- and Justin signed it with relief. He didn't even want to consider the sort of humiliation that would've accompanied a declined credit card, not now.

It was one of the things Lance had warned him about, Justin thought as he and JC maneuvered their way through the thickening crowd. When he'd called Lance earlier from

the office Lance had been at first envious of Justin's luck in scoring a ticket to the hottest game in town, and then shocked by the news that he was going with JC. His deep voice had grown increasingly alarmed as Justin had told him that yes, he was going to the game, and yes, he was going to dinner with JC. By the time Justin had gotten to yes, he intended to pay for the dinner, because he owed JC a meal, Lance had been almost apoplectic.

"Justin, do you not see how insane this is? He handed you the biggest rejection of your life not even a year ago . . ."

"But the best sex of my life too," Justin had interrupted cheerfully. He was still grinning; nothing was going to bring him down today.

". . . and he's your boss, Justin, he signs your paychecks . . ."

"Actually, I have direct deposit."

"Which is just, so . . . Justin, do you see how that is so not the point?" Lance had been exasperated beyond belief. "The point is, you've been mooning over this guy since you met him last year, and even though you keep telling me what an asshole he is, it's so obvious that you haven't given up on him even though it's an impossible situation, even though he keeps telling you that it's an impossible situation. And this is -- it's just -- Justin. You're setting yourself up for another fall here."

Justin had rolled his eyes. "Dude, stop. I know that it's not a date. I mean, yeah, it's the playoff game but it's with work people, right? I'm thinking about it as sort of a corporate perk. Really."

Lance had been silent for a moment, then sighed heavily. "Okay, you lost me. Explain to me how buying dinner for your boss -- the one you have the huge and guilty and sordid past with -- is some sort of a corporate perk."

"Oh, look. It's not like that at all," Justin had insisted. "We're past all that, I'd practically forgotten all about it until just now. Everything's fine."

Lance had been silent for a second, and then burst out laughing. "You can't possibly expect me to believe that!" he'd exclaimed incredulously, and then laughed again.

"Courtsiiiiiiiiiiide, sucker!" Justin had sung out, and then replaced the receiver, still grinning. The memory of Lance's laughter made him smile, and as they approached the main doors of the Garden, JC caught his eye and grinned back. As Justin walked beside him and watched JC hand their tickets to the usher, he felt lighter than air, happier than he'd ever been. He wanted this night to go on forever.

He tried not to crowd JC as they wove through the concourse and to the doorways leading to the floor, but it was all he could do to not put his hands on him, to touch the small of his back or even to take his hand. Justin stuffed his hands into his pockets just to be safe, and tried not to stare at JC's ass as they moved down the steps.

Justin's eyes grew larger and larger as they descended the steps and moved closer to the court. As he followed JC, edging sideways down the center row, he was surprised to see Chris already there. Justin realized with a start that he'd completely forgotten that Chris was going to be at the game as well. The bubble of elation that had surrounded him since getting into the chauffeured Suburban deflated a little and he flushed, embarrassed.

"Move down," JC ordered, and Justin, peering over JC's shoulder, saw Chris's eyebrows go up as he smiled up at them. He held a huge, dripping hamburger in his hand, and had a beer in the cup holder next to him.

"I'm settled here," Chris countered, and grinned as JC hesitated. He moved his knees to the side. "You have room to get by."

JC didn't move an inch, and Justin, fidgeting behind him, felt an unwelcome and unwanted tension worm its way into his stomach. He liked Chris, he did, and Chris was a fellow Knicks fan, but he wanted to sit next to JC. Dear god, he thought with dismay. When had he turned into such a girl?

"C'mon, Chris," JC said quietly. "Don't be an asshole."

Chris took another bite of his hamburger. "I'm not hearing the magic word," he responded sorrowfully, and Justin heard JC groan in exasperation.

"Oh for christ's sake," JC sighed. "Fine. Please. Please move your ass down a seat, Chris."

Chris gathered up his food and moved down one seat, allowing JC and Justin to take their seats to his left. Justin smiled at him across JC and was pleased to see Chris grin back. His eyes were alive with mirth; he was, apparently, already having a wonderful time.

"Hey, man, I'm really sorry you couldn't meet us for dinner," Justin said, and hoped desperately that he sounded sincere.

"Oh, so am I, Justin," Chris answered with elaborate regret. "Believe me, it was just a dirty and tragic shame that I suddenly had *so* much work to do that I had to miss out on the pre-game dinner." He shot a narrow glance at JC out of the corner of his eye before looking back to Justin and shrugging. "But you know, nothing tells you that you're a valued employee like having to stay an extra half-hour, on a Friday night, on the night of a playoff game, because you're the only person in the whole press who can do a color correction properly."

"Yeah, yeah," JC inserted with thinly disguised exasperation, shifting uneasily in the seat beside Justin. "And that's enough shop talk tonight, all right?"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Director sir," Chris said serenely, and Justin sat back in his seat with a laugh. He took in his surroundings with unconcealed joy: the packed arena and the loud buzz of excited conversation over the loud and thumping pre-game music, the players warming up just feet away, the television cameras and journalists jockeying for position under the hoops on either end. Beside him JC's head was nodding in time to the music, his eyes on the court and a small smile curving his full lips. Justin felt the warmth from JC's thigh, just inches from Justin's own leg, and his arms prickled with goose bumps despite the

heat from the capacity crowd and the warm glow from the wine he'd had with dinner. Justin gripped his hands together and cautiously considered Chris's words, and the possibility that JC had engineered their intimate dinner. His heart rate approached a dangerous level and he resisted the urge to turn and examine JC's profile.

The lights went down and the crowd roared as the announcer began to introduce the Lakers' starting line-up. Justin clapped politely, grinning at the good-natured and scattered boos. Beside him JC was applauding his team with a fair amount of enthusiasm, but laughing as Chris heckled the players. His thigh rested lightly against Justin's in the cramped seats and Justin chanced a quick look; JC's smiling face and blue eyes literally took his breath away and he jerked his attention back to the court as the Knicks were introduced. He tapped his feet in time to the music, his entire body humming with excitement and anticipation.

They stood for the national anthem. The large, already-tipsy man on Justin's left lumbered unsteadily to his feet and Justin dodged to the right to get out of his way, bumping solidly into JC. JC's hands settled on Justin's waist and the small of his back to steady him and he froze at the contact. JC's palms were heated and firm on Justin's body; the air whooshed out of his lungs and he restrained a hungry shudder with a huge effort. He was still blindly facing the weaving man on his left when JC leaned closer and spoke quietly into his ear.

"Okay?" he asked softly, his voice low in Justin's ear and crystal clear against the background noise of the anthem, the crowd. His chest was unbearably warm against Justin's back and Justin closed his eyes and wet his lips, for a moment wishing that he didn't have to move away, that he could turn in JC's arms and wrap his own around him, run his hands down the smooth plane of his back, pull him close. Instead Justin nodded and exhaled shakily as JC's hands tightened on his waist, then slowly drew away. He felt dizzy.

The game started. Justin sipped gratefully from the beer Chris had handed him and tried to pay attention to the game. JC made low comments and observations and Justin did his best to respond intelligently but the outcome of the game suddenly seemed secondary. JC was beside him, sitting *right* beside him and speaking to him and trading smiling insults over disputed scoring calls, and by the end of the first quarter Justin felt as if the only moments of clarity he'd experienced were the ones when he'd been turned away from the action on the court, speaking to JC and staring into his eyes.

Halftime came with a flurry of music and activity as people rose from their seats. JC and Chris entered into a spirited disagreement about basketball strategy and Justin was watching, fascinated by JC's complete devotion to winning the argument, when his phone vibrated vigorously in his pocket. Distracted by JC's profile, he pulled it from his pocket and flipped it open.

"Well, don't you look like you're enjoying yourself." Lance's deep voice was patently amused, and Justin grinned.

"Oh, you know it, dude," he answered. "Lance, our seats are . . ."

"You don't have to tell me," Lance interrupted smoothly. "Every time the camera goes down court I see your shiny happy face, sitting right there at courtside." He laughed. "You look like a teenaged girl at the prom with the captain of the football team, Justin. Honestly, do you

even know what the score is? Right now, without looking at the scoreboard, can you tell me what the score is?"

"Oh, fuck you man," Justin said sheepishly, and felt his cheeks start to burn. "You're just jealous 'cause you're alone with your Doritos, watching the playoffs on television."

"With the rest of the losers in the world," Chris piped up, not even pretending not to listen to Justin's conversation.

"That's right, I am," Lance said agreeably. "Of course, if I were there I'd actually be paying attention to the very excellent basketball game being played instead of fluttering my eyelashes at the handsome man in the next seat."

"Oh, you suck. I'm hanging up now," Justin said.

"You do that, honey," Lance crooned. "Have a good time, and call if you're going to be out past midnight, and don't accept rides from any strangers, and if that handsome man next to you asks if you want to go somewhere to watch the submarine races you say . . ."

Justin keyed his phone off and slid it back into his pocket. Chris had gone back to baiting JC about the Lakers and their lack of staying power, and JC slanted a devastating smile at Justin as he turned away to argue. Justin leaned his elbow against JC's and shivered with anticipation as JC nudged subtly back.

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"Loser buys drinks!" Chris announced as they climbed to their feet after the final buzzer. "Loser. That would be you, Mr. Director. You might know business but once again you have demonstrated that you most emphatically do not know basketball, and this time it's going to cost you. Big," he finished with satisfaction, and Justin smiled as he met JC's eyes.

"Drinks," JC answered absently, his eyes intent on Justin's. "Absolutely. Let's do it."

It was a long walk to where their car waited. The crowd forced them to walk close together, their bodies nudging easily as they left the arena and joined the teeming, exuberant hordes on the street. Once JC was jostled and Justin placed his hands on JC's waist to steady him, as he'd done to Justin during the national anthem. JC leaned back against him for a second, flashing a smile over his shoulder before moving slowly away. "Stick close," he murmured and Justin gulped.

"So, where do you want to go?" JC asked, raising his voice to include Chris. The car was in sight, the driver standing beside it at the end of the block by the restaurant where they'd eaten dinner.

"Oh, hey, you know what? I'm suddenly find myself very, very sleepy," Chris said innocently. "I'm just going to head on home and sleep the sleep of the righteous and victorious. You two," he added, his eyes glinting slyly, "should just go right on without me."

Fuck, yes, Justin thought and then stopped, suddenly feeling unbearably guilty. "Oh, no, Chris c'mon," he said. "Just a couple of drinks, man." Chris shook his head and Justin put more effort into it. "Just one, even. You have to come."

"Don't be an asshole, Chris. Just one drink, and then we'll take you home," JC said, but Chris was speaking over him.

"No, no my mind's made up," he said, his smile glinting evilly in the light from the street lamps. "You two have a, uh, good time. Justin? Try to teach the rich boy something useful about basketball, will ya? I'll catch you both later." He'd been backing away as he talked, and with another wave turned and jogged toward a cab stand on the corner.

For a moment they both stared after him, and then JC turned slowly to Justin with a smile. His eyes were clear and very direct, and Justin lifted his chin and smiled back as he waited for him to speak.

"Still up for a drink?" JC asked mildly.

"I am," Justin answered forthrightly. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his light jacket. Inside, he had fingers on both hands crossed.

"Well, we have a number of options," JC said quietly, and took a step closer to Justin as he moved away from a group of laughing fans coming down the street. "There's a sports pub around the corner that has good beer," he offered.

Justin took a deep breath and tried to keep his voice steady. "I imagine that'll be mobbed," he said, and JC nodded in agreement.

"True," he said. "Well, there are other places that are quieter."

"You should know," Justin said, holding JC's eyes, "that I feel honor bound to make you pay for the most hideously expensive drinks I can possibly find tonight. Chris would be disappointed in me if I didn't," he said, and smiled wider as JC's eyes moved over him, sharp and rapid.

"Expensive, huh," he responded, and Justin nodded with satisfaction, loving the way JC's eyes crinkled with his smile. "Maybe you can give me an idea of what you have in mind," JC said.

Justin's heart felt like it might thump right out of his chest. He felt breathless from the gamble he was about to take; he'd been turned away so many times, but JC's face, open and smiling, and his brilliant and direct eyes made him brave enough to try this one last time. Just one more time, he thought, and steeled himself.

"I've learned recently that I have very expensive taste in champagne," he said softly, and waited breathlessly for JC to answer.

JC was silent for a long and painful moment, his gaze sharp and narrow on Justin's face. Justin met his eyes without blinking, and waited.

Then JC smiled, hungry and a little wistful as he examined Justin’s features. "I guess it is a special sort of occasion," he said thoughtfully.

"It is," Justin agreed softly. "One of those very unique, one-time only sort of things." His throat was very, very dry.

"A one-time only thing," JC murmured, and moved infinitesimally closer to Justin. "Well, I know a place that stocks the very, very best champagne there is," he said, and Justin let out his breath in a sigh of relief and excruciating anticipation. "I think it might be just what you’re looking for."

"I hope you’re not talking about your stuffy family club," Justin murmured, stepping closer to JC until they were face to face.

"No," JC said, and now his smile was sharper and more predatory. "I’m thinking somewhere much more private."

"What are we waiting for?" Justin asked, and grinned as JC laughed and nodded his head toward the waiting car.

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Be calm, JC told himself as they entered his living room, as he watched Justin slowly walk the perimeter, then stop in front of the window to gaze out at the night sky, strong and beautiful when he turned to smile at JC.

"You all right?" he softly asked, and JC only barely stifled a laugh. No, he was not all right -- the fact that he was in this situation at all was sign enough of that. And worse yet, JC himself had put them here, had in fact done a rather considerable amount of wrangling to end up like this with Justin before him right now. JC, not Justin, had asked Chris to work late. JC, not Justin, had all but arranged an intimate dinner for the two of them. JC, not Justin, had easily and without even blinking agreed to Justin's ridiculous proposal out on the street. No matter how much JC wanted to think that he was above such maneuvering, this situation was clearly of his making.

"I'm fine," he told Justin and smiled back. The stark truth of it was that there was no way he was going to forgo an evening with Justin, not when he had him so close like this, and not when Justin himself was so obviously willing and . . . receptive, as he'd said before. It had simply been far too long since JC had last touched him, really touched him, and even though he could have coldly and clearly listed any number of reasons why it would be a very bad idea to sleep with Justin, there was no way in hell JC was going to deny himself now.

Denial, after all, had been the problem, hadn't it? JC looked at Justin's shoulders, the curve of his back, his long legs, and very nearly sighed. The more he longed for Justin without acting on it, the more power he gave Justin over him, the more he sank into obsession and weakness. The thing to do was give into it in a conscious, calculated way, to bring himself -- and, hopefully, Justin -- as much pleasure as possible and then to end this preoccupation, to stop being so . . . disempowered by the situation. If he let himself have sex with Justin

tonight, he could finally get it out of his system, and the result would be favorable in both the short run and the long run. It made all the sense in the world.

And god, Justin was gorgeous when he smiled, his eyes open and soft, his teeth flashing in the half-darkened room. JC had wanted him for so long now, had had so many fevered dreams and imaginings about this moment that he didn't know whether to jump right in or prolong things, didn't know whether to come on strong or soft.

JC felt his hands threaten to shake and casually stuffed them into the pockets of his jeans, forcing himself to breathe smoothly and evenly, to hide the edge of his desire. He needed to play this right, needed very much not to let Justin see what a fool he had become for him, how far gone he was.

"So," JC forced himself to say as Justin turned to look out the window again, hiding the smile on his face from JC. "I believe I promised you champagne."

"Yes," Justin immediately answered, and JC had to catch his breath as Justin swung around again, because he looked so expectant and confident, so very much at peace with what they were doing here tonight. It was enough to make a person jealous.

"Follow me and we'll get you some."

Justin smiled wickedly. "Shouldn't the butler do that for us?"

The butler? JC drew his brows together in momentary exasperation. "Of course I don't have a butler."

"There was one before. At the party," Justin reminded him.

"Oh." That was true. "Well, there's not usually. Seriously, Justin, I take care of myself."

"I'm sure you do, JC," Justin said lightly, teasingly, then fell into step behind JC as he led him to the kitchen.

JC wanted to be distant and smooth, but all he was aware of as Justin followed him down the hall was the steady ache of his body, the way his nerves were strung taut, eager to vibrate at any sign at all from Justin.

"What -- no cook?" Justin asked as they entered the kitchen, and JC rolled his eyes.

"Sorry to disappoint your fantasies about the idle rich, but there's no cook either."

Not tonight, anyway, and Justin simply didn't need to know more than that right now, now did he?

JC liked his kitchen: it was spare and clean, with broad counters and cabinets that had glass panes in the doors so he could see exactly what he had and exactly how he'd arranged it. His appliances were big, steel, and industrial-looking -- an Aga cooker, a giant refrigerator with two doors, a state-of-the-art coffee and espresso maker, a blender for his protein shakes. It

was precise and beautiful, simple and pleasing. JC reached for the light switch and then stopped himself -- the dim light over the stove was all he wanted.

"Sterile, functional, and impressive," Justin pronounced as he looked around in the semidarkness. "In other words, very much you."

"Watch who you're calling sterile," JC said over his shoulder, heading for the fridge and then pausing in front of it as he tried to remember exactly which champagne he happened to have at the moment.

"You do have it, right?" Justin said from right behind him, and JC closed his eyes for a split second and absolutely ordered himself not to shiver, no matter how close Justin was, no matter how wonderful he smelled or how much warmth he was giving off.

"Of course." JC pulled open the fridge, blinking a little at the light, eyes rapidly taking inventory. A couple of shelves up and there it was, and as JC reached for the bottle, he began to wonder whether Veuve Cliquot was what he'd served --

When Justin placed his hands on JC's waist and then slid them downward, all thought in the world swept into a magnificent wave of sensation. JC heard himself gasp, and for the longest, dizziest few seconds of his life, he remained motionless and luxuriated in the feel of Justin's touch until finally securing the bottle of champagne in a death grip and then rapidly stepping back, only just resisting the rather considerable urge he felt to sink to his knees and bring Justin down with him.

"God, JC, you're so hot," Justin said in a low, almost reverent voice. His hands lingered warmly on JC’s waist but he moved away enough for JC to close the refrigerator and turn to face him before leaning in, his mouth reaching for JC’s. But JC leaned back against the refrigerator door and brought the bottle of champagne up between them. This was not about quick and easy satisfaction, he reminded himself. This was about assuaging and hopefully eliminating what had become a crippling sort of need. But it was almost painful to avoid Justin’s soft lips, to give him a slow smile as he balanced the heel of the bottle against his thighs and peeled away the foil.

"We need glasses." JC said, then quickly lowered his eyes when he happened to look into Justin's. "They're right over there, in the top cupboard. Can you see them?

"I see," Justin murmured, his eyes not moving from JC's until JC lowered his head again to untwist the wire on the bottle. A few seconds later, the hollow sound of the cork popping filled the room, and JC's fingers were covered in fizzing liquid.

JC looked at Justin again. "Glasses," he said, then felt the world around him slow to a halt as Justin leaned in and raised JC's hand to his mouth, carefully sucking the champagne from his fingers, his mouth hot, his eyes hotter still. It was all JC could do not to moan, and when Justin reached for the bottle, JC silently handed it to him, then watched with growing amazement as Justin easily and unselfconsciously lifted the bottle to his mouth and began to drink, his throat long and beautiful.

"Justin," JC murmured disapprovingly before he could stop himself, the last vestiges of his self-control starting to erode, and Justin's body shook a little then, probably because he was trying to suppress laughter. After just a few seconds, he lowered the bottle, breathing deep in pleasure, and then looked intently at JC and slowly wiped his beautiful wet mouth with the back of his hand.

"Justin," JC said again, only this time in sheerest admiration, and didn't for a second pretend to play it cool as Justin's lips settled on his. JC groaned into the slick interior of Justin's mouth, delightedly stroking Justin's tongue with his, then stepping very, very close, as close as he wanted to be, feeling fierce satisfaction as he realized that Justin was hard already -- almost as hard as he was.

"Wait, wait," Justin said a little breathlessly, stepping back and offering the bottle of champagne to JC. "You have some."

"This is really not the way to appreciate --" JC said in spite of himself, then cut that short and drank before Justin could begin to laugh. The champagne was cold and sharp, and it fizzed and burned its way down JC's throat, making him feel giddy and reckless. JC lowered the bottle and reached out to put a hand in the middle of Justin's chest, and then took another long swig before slowly walking Justin backward, easing him toward the counter, then placing the bottle next to him once Justin had stilled.

The need was back, and JC stepped immediately into Justin and covered his lips, shuddering contentedly as Justin's big hands smoothed over his back and he opened his mouth for JC. As the kiss deepened, JC closed his eyes and reveled in it, loving the feel of Justin's heart pounding against his, the way Justin hitched his breath as JC's hands moved closer and closer to the opening of his pants. For a moment, JC was furious with himself -- he needed this far, far too much, and he was far, far too helpless with desire -- but then Justin softly murmured his name and let his hands slide down and over JC's ass, and everything but pleasure disappeared. They leaned against the counter for what seemed like forever, pausing occasionally to take long drinks of the champagne, both of them becoming progressively flushed, straining into each other, filling the silent kitchen with low, eager moans as JC parted Justin's legs with his thigh and brought their hips together.

"JC," Justin gasped as JC finally opened the button of his pants and then gently eased the zipper down before sliding a hand inside to cup and stroke him though his underwear. Justin's throat was flushed, his eyes bright and hungry, his mouth swollen from kisses and red from the cool champagne: he was absolutely breathtaking, and for a moment, JC froze in awe, almost astounded at his luck in having him here, in his own kitchen, and so obviously very ready for more.

"JC," Justin repeated, pressing against his hand in encouragement, and JC leaned forward and gently bit the side of his neck, then kissed down as far as the neckline of Justin's shirt would let him, all the while slowly stroking Justin, breathing almost as hard as Justin was, adoring the way Justin gripped him so tightly, trying determinedly to bring them closer and closer.

Eventually, JC became impatient: making out in his kitchen was good and well, but Justin was now so responsive, so hungry, that it was an impediment not to have a bed to stretch onto.

"Come to my room?" JC asked, suffering an agony of embarrassment as he heard the pleading in his voice, as he watched a small, satisfied smile curve onto Justin's face in response.

"Of course," Justin murmured, and JC sighed and then kissed him some more, because going to his room would mean stopping touching Justin for a while, and now he wasn't sure he was ready to do that, particularly with Justin so hard and hot under his hand, Justin squirming and sighing so beautifully. They could stay here after all -- there was plenty of room in the kitchen, even if it wasn't --

Justin gripped his shoulders firmly, then spoke in a low, quivering voice. "Bed, JC. Take me there," he murmured, and then gently pushed JC back a bit.

"Right," JC answered shakily and then almost automatically began to lead the way. It seemed as if the journey took forever, and more than once, JC came close to stopping, pressing Justin into the wall, and then kissing him all over again, but he doggedly kept his goal in mind, and soon the two of them were in JC's bedroom, kicking off their shoes, shucking off their clothes, and collapsing into the bed together.

"Oh my god," Justin breathed as he stretched over JC and kissed his chest, his body taut against JC's, his mouth clever and hot, and he was . . . oh god, he was. JC arched in delight, then carefully sank his hands into Justin's hair, his fingers gently pressing into Justin's scalp as Justin moved his mouth down his abdomen, nipped lightly at his hipbones, and then slid his big hands down JC's sides as he continued to move lower. JC closed his eyes and bit his lower lip, reflexively drawing up his legs as Justin's hot tongue slid reverently over the head of his cock, licking sweetly and dirtily, sending sudden, sharp stabs of delight up and down JC's spine.

Please, JC thought, please, then clenched his jaw tightly to prevent the words from slipping out. This was as frightening as it was exhilarating, and when Justin finally slid his mouth over his cock, taking JC deep inside exactly the way he longed for, JC's anxiety grew even sharper. But it was impossible not to respond to the hot, tight slide of Justin's mouth, not to shudder against the strong hands cupping his ass and lifting him slightly -- and impossible, finally, not to open his mouth and let the plea come out again, this time in audible form.

"Easy now," Justin whispered, his voice shaking too, his eyes dark and full of delight, and JC had to shut his eyes and moan even as he recognized that Justin had just coaxed out of him the very same response he'd given JC months ago in this same bedroom.

It didn't matter -- it didn't matter at all, because this was about letting go for one incredible night and then gaining control again, JC weakly told himself, and then let all thought recede as Justin's mouth and tongue made him ache, and then throb, and then shudder almost convulsively as he began to come, hips surging desperately up toward Justin as he released into his throat.

When finally it was over, Justin tenderly kissed his abdomen, then slowly slid up his body, his hands gentle and possessive as he carefully situated himself on top of JC, as he encouraged him to part his legs, to press close into him.

"Yes," JC said, his voice uneven as he trembled through the aftereffects of his orgasm. "Yes, Justin." He wanted to take care of this before Justin tried it himself.

"Yes what?" Justin whispered.

"Yes, that took the edge off," JC told him, and then had to smile at the look on Justin's face.

"That night, you know," Justin murmured after a moment. "I think about it so much, JC -- it's like I can't stop it."

JC breathed in deep. "Me too," he softly said, and then Justin kissed him gently, his mouth imploring and hungry, and JC closed his eyes and felt his world start to collapse as the intimacy of the moment deepened. He knew that he should push Justin away, should divert the course they were now taking, but instead JC shivered and stroked Justin's tongue with his own, relishing the tremors running through Justin, the soft, careful way he was holding him. When Justin finally drew back, their eyes met and held for a long time, and again, JC knew that he should withdraw, knew that he absolutely needed to, in fact.

But he didn't. He kept looking into Justin's eyes, scared out of his wits but unable to refuse the warmth in them, unable not to connect with him. It was hopeless -- he was hopeless.

"JC --" Justin began, and JC snapped immediately back to himself, because he knew at once from the tone of Justin's voice that he was about to say something neither of them could retreat from, something that would bind them together and make everything scarily, undeniably real.

"In the bedside table," JC quickly said, and then worked a hand down the lean, muscled length of Justin's torso until he had fingers around his cock. "I'm ready."

"But I --" Justin began, but something in JC's eyes must have warned him, because then he added, "Okay, yeah," and moved across the bed to fumble in the drawer for condoms and lubricant.

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It had been the best way to handle it, JC thought in disorganized and almost crazed fashion as he tensed in delight while Justin's fingers sank deep inside of him, as he opened his eyes and saw the almost dangerous need on Justin's face. Clearly, JC was going to have to be the one to keep things in control tonight, to prevent both of them from going too far.

Then Justin's fingers crooked and JC's mind blanked, and before he knew it, he was reaching for Justin, trying to pull him closer, and Justin was smiling and kissing his stomach even as his fingers drove JC even further out of his mind. When at last Justin settled between JC's legs and slid deep inside of him, JC didn't even try to hide his pleasure, didn't even try to look away. Justin was careful and almost respectful until JC gripped his arms, looked impatiently at him, and forcefully whispered, "Move" -- after which point he got exactly what he wanted, which was to be driven fast and hard into a sensation that was beyond all thought and emotion.

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This night was turning out to be everything the first time had been and then more, JC thought later as he kissed his way down Justin's chest, sighing with pleasure himself as Justin rubbed his shoulders, urging him onward. Justin was ravenous and eager, his hands all over JC, his voice persuasive and sweet -- he was working very hard to get JC to do exactly what he wanted him to, and it was possibly the hottest thing JC had ever seen. When he situated himself between Justin's legs, JC looked into Justin's face, saw the vulnerability there, and felt himself blush deeply as he slowly, easily sank fingers into him and began.

Justin wanted him from behind, wanted to bury his face in the pillow, hold his ass high, and rock back into him, and JC was more than willing to accommodate that, to slide hands hungrily and reverently over his ass, over the curve of his back, to lean forward and bring them close together. And if JC wasn't quite kind enough to stop himself from teasing a little, giving Justin almost what he wanted but not quite, time and time again, he was at least able to move the way Justin needed him to when Justin started begging, his voice rough and low and pleading, and he was saying something JC definitely wanted to hear, something that sounded so gorgeous and so very, very hot . . .

JC bent forward to listen, then gasped as Justin surged backward, and then JC had to thrust, had to move forward again and again, powerful, deep thrusting, and Justin groaned in pleasure and urged him on, his hand busy on his cock. It was raw and wonderful, but somewhere in the middle of it, JC realized that it wasn't going to be enough, that this wasn't how he wanted it to play out. When he stilled himself, then slowly ran hands over Justin's sides, gentling him, Justin trembled hard underneath him, desperately murmuring, "More, JC. More." For a moment, JC almost gave into it -- but then he remembered what he wanted, what he needed, and began, slow, gentle surges forward, careful and tender, and when Justin shuddered hard underneath him and let out a low, broken cry, JC knew he'd done the right thing. His desire was fierce and nearly ungovernable, threatening to overflow, but JC kept it check so that he could be deliberate with Justin, so that he could bring them both to the edge slowly and gradually, so that neither of them could deny what they were feeling, neither of them could rush or push or force anything. It was perfect and it was devastating, and by the time the two of them shuddered together and then collapsed, JC's heart was pounding in terror as much as pleasure, because he had no idea on earth what he'd just done, or how he was going to deny it to himself in the future.

"Come here," Justin whispered, his voice warm and tender, and JC did it, moved next to him, slid arms tight around him, and then closed his eyes and breathed with him until they both fell asleep.

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Early the next morning JC opened his eyes and groaned, letting them fall shut again and stretching lazily, arching in pleasure as he extended his arms above his head and pointed his toes. He felt lazy, heavy and sated, and when he breathed in deep, he could smell Justin all over him, which was both dizzying and wonderful. As soon as he felt a little more awake, he was going to reach over and slide a hand down Justin's back, and Justin would slowly roll

over, open his hot mouth, and then everything would happen all over again, just like it had last night.

At that thought, JC stilled a little. Last night had been undeniably excellent from a physical standpoint, but that hadn't been all it was, no matter how much he didn't want to admit that. Almost everything that had passed between them had done so without words, but it would be impossible to claim that he and Justin weren't closer now, that something indefinable and yet solidly intimate hadn't arisen between them during the night.

It was unsettling, to be sure, and even more unnerving than that was the fact that right now, JC saw no reason whatsoever why he shouldn't rush in for more, shouldn't try yet again to get to that place of pleasure and closeness. It had been strangely beautiful, and Justin had taken him there, Justin, who was difficult and annoying and beautiful and tender and terrifying.

JC couldn't resist him anymore. Even as he thought it, he felt his face redden, but it was impossible to claim otherwise. He had to be near Justin, had to have him, had to go on whatever strange trip they'd started and see it through to the end.

Yes. That's exactly what they'd do. JC opened his eyes, turned on his side to greet Justin, his heart and head swirling with uncomfortable, frightening thoughts, and then drew in a short, sharp breath.

The bed was empty. Justin was gone.

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Justin spent most of Saturday alternating between euphoria and a deep gloom. The joy came when he thought about the exhilaration of the previous evening’s dinner, the basketball game, and its very, very satisfying aftermath, and caused him to drift aimlessly around his apartment, smiling goofily at nothing. The gloom and its accompanying anxiety followed the euphoria when he remembered waking up in JC’s bed before dawn with an unnerving sense of deja vu that had him dressing and slipping silently from the penthouse while JC slept.

Despite his strenuous and relatively sleepless night Justin had been unable to nap, wandering about his apartment and passing equal amounts of time staring out his windows and staring at his telephone. Had he been wrong to leave the way he had? It had certainly seemed like a good idea at the time, when the familiarity of JC’s bedroom in the dim pre-dawn light had reminded him far too vividly of the last time he’d been there. It had suddenly seemed crucial to get out of there before there could be a repeat of the morning-after incident that still, after almost a year, made him cringe with humiliation.

But still, he thought as he stared at his phone and nibbled on his thumbnail, things were different now. He and JC weren’t strangers indulging in a one-night stand; they’d worked together for almost half a year now, knew each other, had had numerous encounters. They were almost like friends, after a fashion. And all these things had contributed to making the previous night just incredible. Even better than the first time, and that, Justin thought ruefully, was really saying something.

As he thought of the way JC had looked at him and touched him last night, Justin knew that if nothing else, the intensity of the attraction JC harbored toward Justin was almost as strong as what Justin felt for JC. And if he looked at it that way, Justin thought slowly, then bolting from JC's penthouse in the dark of the night could be construed as one of the rudest and most thoughtless things he'd ever done. His eyes strayed to his telephone again. Maybe he should call.

But then he remembered JC's careless dismissal of him the previous summer, and he closed his eyes and groaned out loud. All the courage he'd had in suggesting JC take him home after the game had vanished early that morning -- the sight of JC sprawled naked and boneless in sleep beside him had brought a flood of feelings that had simply overwhelmed him with their intensity: wonder, joy, a deep, gnawing desire that shocked him considering the night they'd just spent, and a shuddering sort of terror when he realized that the absolute compulsion to stay right where he was and watch JC open his eyes had almost nothing to do with sex.

For what seemed like the millionth time that day Justin dragged his eyes and then his body away from the telephone in his living room. What was he thinking? He'd had every right to protect himself from the sort of devastating humiliation he knew JC was perfectly capable of dishing out. There was no reason to call him. If anything, he thought righteously as he rooted through his refrigerator for something to eat, JC ought to be calling him.

Plus, he reminded himself wryly, he didn't know JC's home number. Or his cell phone number for that matter. He laughed aloud at that thought, the sound echoing humorlessly in his silent kitchen. And he'd been thinking that there could be more between them than the occasional one-nighter. He was a fool.

Justin turned his attention to a late lunch and Saturday afternoon sports on television, and determinedly pushed all other subjects away.

It didn't work, of course. Justin couldn't quite shut down his brain, and he was irritated to find himself jumping hopefully every time his telephone rang. Televised sports couldn't hold his interest, various invitations from friends failed to excite him, and his attempt to do his laundry failed immediately when he looked at the clothes he'd worn -- and JC had peeled off him -- the previous night. The heated memory of JC's dim and elegant kitchen, the taste of champagne and the taste of JC's mouth as his warm fingers had stroked Justin's skin was his undoing.

After an almost sleepless night of tossing and turning (and thinking truly alarming thoughts about getting up and taking a cab to JC's penthouse, immediately -- although he had no idea what he would say when he got there he had some very clear ideas about what he wanted to do), Justin found himself examining the morning paper's society page and looking for a familiar face among the glittering rich of New York City. When he realized what he was doing, he threw the paper down in disgust. Justin had had enough.

Instead of mooning about his apartment he began his Sunday morning with a granola bar and a five-mile jog through the streets of New York City, taking special pains to avoid Central Park. After a more substantial breakfast, Justin showered, dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, grabbed his briefcase and headed to the office. It would get him out of the apartment and take his mind off things, he told himself firmly as he walked to the subway. There was a big list-

setting meeting this week that he just knew Joey hadn't adequately prepared for, and once he was done with that, there were a million other things to do.

The press was utterly silent on Sunday morning and Justin settled into his peaceful office with a sigh of relief. He ignored the fluorescent overheads and turned on his desk lamp, slipped a CD into his stereo and turned the sound low, and settled in to work.

He was still struggling to concentrate when he caught a flash of movement in his open doorway. The fright caused him to practically leap out of his chair.

JC smiled slightly. He was in jeans too, with a plain black tee shirt that fit snugly enough to make Justin gulp. His eyes were cool and completely unreadable. "Hey," he said quietly, and his eyebrows lifted a little. "Sorry I startled you."

Well, it wasn't the ideal way to have this first meeting, Justin thought, one hand still pressed over his galloping heart. He wished he'd had a little warning.

"It's okay," he said, and tried a small smile. It was shaky. "I didn't know . . . I mean, I thought I was alone here today."

JC glanced over his shoulder at the dark and silent offices. "I think it's just you and I," he said thoughtfully, and Justin cursed himself at the images his traitorous mind conjured up with that statement. JC turned back to him, the smile gone. "Why are you here?" he inquired politely, and Justin slowly settled himself back in his chair. His heart was pounding.

"Oh, I have a dozen things to do," he said airily, waving a hand at the top of his desk. "It's going to be a full week, and I wanted to get a leg up on it." He was able, with a little bit of effort, to meet JC's steady eyes. "And what brings you here on a Sunday morning?"

JC blinked and for a moment looked uncertain, and Justin felt a small surge of satisfaction. So JC wasn't all that sure of himself this morning either. Good.

"Well, I couldn't sleep," JC answered straightforwardly, and this time it was Justin's turn to blink. "And I couldn't get anything done at home, so I thought I'd come in and try to get caught up on some work."

He offered a tentative smile and Justin returned it, his eyes devouring the lift of JC's soft lips. JC's hair was slightly damp, curling at the ends like he'd just showered; his face was smoothly shaven and Justin ached to touch it, with his hands, with his mouth. He cleared his throat nervously, and his hands started to sweat as the silence stretched between them.

"So I wanted to say . . ."

"I was going to ask . . ."

They both stopped and stared at each other for a moment, then JC nodded. "You first," he said. His voice was very quiet.

Justin took a deep breath and got to his feet. "I wanted to say, thanks again for the basketball ticket," he said, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "It was really amazing, being that

close. I had such a great time."

JC didn’t move a muscle, his eyes clear and unwavering on Justin’s face. He stood just outside of Justin’s doorway like there was an invisible wall there, keeping him out. "I should be thanking you," he said slowly, his voice low and soft. He quirked a tiny smile, his eyes intent as Justin’s face heated up. "For dinner, of course," he continued smoothly.

"Oh, yeah. No problem," Justin answered, subdued. He looked at the top of his desk, his thoughts chaotic as he struggled to find the right thing to say. "Listen," he said, and pulled a hand out of his pocket to rub his forehead. "About what happened after the game . . ."

JC raised his eyebrows politely and gave him no help at all. Justin plunged on. "I feel kind of bad about the way I left. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, after what happened the first time we, uh. I mean, when I remembered that, and what you said earlier, about it being a special occasion and all . . ." He glanced at JC’s unreadable face. "But later I thought it might have been . . . Well. Rude of me."

Silence again. "Well, it was certainly understandable," JC finally said, his voice formal. He suddenly seemed much farther away than Justin’s doorway, and he felt his heart sink heavily. He stuffed his hand back into his pocket and shrugged.

"So, I just . . . I mean, I’ve pushed you more than once in the last few months, and you’ve made your reasons for saying no clear, over and over." Justin swallowed hard. "And, well, I feel bad about that, and I just want you to know that I’m not going to put you in that position again." He forced himself to stop talking, and wished with all his might that JC would say something, anything encouraging, that he would open his mouth, smile, and tell Justin that he wanted to make that one time into a second time, and maybe even more than that.

"I see," JC said slowly and was silent for a long, long moment before clearing his throat. "Well, there’s no reason for you to feel badly about any of it, I completely understand where you’re coming from. And I appreciate you letting me know what’s on your mind, Justin." He took a step back, his face smooth and beautiful and utterly composed, and Justin clenched his fists desperately.

"Was there something you wanted to ask me?" Justin said, and prayed he didn’t sound too hopeful.

"No, it was nothing important. I’ll just let you get back to work," JC said. He nodded in a friendly fashion and disappeared from Justin’s doorway.

Justin listened to his steps move away down the silent hallway, and dropped his forehead to his desk as despair washed over him.

July

July

Justin’s early-morning meeting with Astrid Biltingham had been friendly and very productive, but as he strode down the hallway toward his office he couldn’t help but feel that he was already behind. It was barely 10:30 but the press was bustling and busy and Justin was accustomed to coming in early now, to getting his work in order and his emails and messages responded to before he turned to his other projects and the press heated up around him. Coming in this late threw him off.

His office was dark and quiet, but there was a neat stack of pink message slips from his assistant and a blinking light on his telephone. Justin muttered a curse and sank into his chair as he powered on his computer. Almost immediately it chimed at him, notifying him of unread emails and adding measurably to his stress level. He scanned quickly to see if any of them were marked urgent -- or if any of them were from JC, although there was no reason to think that they would be -- just as the mail delivery intern came whistling into his office and dumped what seemed like a gigantic stack of thick envelopes into his inbox.

"Good morning! How’s it goin’?" the intern asked in an obscenely cheerful tone of voice. Justin looked at him wearily -- his name was Omar; he was the nephew of one of the fiction editors and was just working at the press for the summer. He was unfailingly cheerful, usually sported music headphones in his ears, and he never looked like he had a single care in the whole world. Justin crushed a completely ridiculous spurt of envy and smiled in response to the greeting.

"Just great," he said quietly. "Thanks. Would you mind closing my door on your way out?"

"No problem!" Omar responded with a big smile, and closed the door with a slam loud enough to make the pens on Justin’s desk rattle. Justin winced, and then turned to his messages.

The pink slip at the top of the pile was from Lance Bass, who had called at 8:30 looking for him and asking Justin to return his call. In the comment section Justin’s assistant had written "OR ELSE!!!" in big block letters, and Justin groaned.

Lance was definitely gunning for him, and Justin could understand why. He knew that if the situation were reversed he’d be hunting Lance down with the same sort of diligence Lance was demonstrating here, and Justin didn’t know much longer he could avoid him. Not that he was really avoiding him, Justin thought defensively as he frowned at the message slip. He’d returned Lance’s calls, but mostly they’d been confined to trading messages because Justin was just . . . busy. He had so much to do, so much to prepare for at work and he’d been putting in some brutal hours to make sure that he was all caught up.

But the truth of the matter was that Justin had been careful to return Lance's calls only at times when he knew for sure Lance's cell phone would be turned off, so he could leave cheery, rushed messages instead of having to have any sort of in-depth conversation. Lance had seemed content to let that go on for a while, but now it seemed that Justin's time had run out.

Taking a deep breath, Justin brought his telephone receiver to his ear and slowly punched in Lance's office number from memory. It rang three times and Justin was just feeling hopeful that he'd perhaps gotten lucky again -- perhaps Lance was out of his office and Justin could leave a voice mail message and he'd be off the hook for another day . . .

"Lance Bass," a familiar deep voice said, and Justin closed his eyes and crossed his fingers.

"Hey!" he said in as cheerful a voice as he could muster. "How's it going, man?"

"Well," Lance drawled slowly. "If it isn't my old buddy Justin Timberlake. I thought you'd dropped off the planet or something."

"Oh, hey," Justin said with a laugh. "I know I've been busy and all, but that's just uncalled for."

"Really?" Lance asked in that elaborately incredulous voice that Justin both admired and dreaded. "Let's see -- I've left you how many voice mails? How many e-mails? And it takes a direct threat to get you to call me back." Lance sighed dramatically. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think that the high and mighty circles you're moving in these days have made you forget the little people, Justin."

"C'mon," Justin said defensively. "One lucky break on a seat to a basketball game doesn't mean I'm moving in any different circles. Seriously, I've just been way busy."

"Hmmm," Lance said, considering. "I'm so glad you brought up that basketball game, Justin. Because I've been meaning to ask you --"

Justin sat up abruptly in his chair. "Oh, wait," he interrupted, his voice rushed. "I'm sorry, Lance, that's my other line ringing, I have to go, let me call you ba --"

"Oh no you don't," Lance said suddenly, fiercely. "You'll put me on hold, and you will deal with that call, and then you're going to get back on this line and talk to me, Justin!"

Justin picked up his pen and gripped it tightly, stabbing it into the top of his desk. "Okay, okay," he said impatiently, and then dropped the pen, placed Lance on hold, and slammed the receiver down on his desk. He sat back in his chair and rocked back and forth, glaring resentfully at the blinking hold light. After a couple of minutes he picked up the receiver and stabbed the button to bring Lance back on the line.

"Yeah, okay," he said without preamble. "I'm sorry, I know I've been kind of not around, and I don't want you to think that I'm, you know, trying to avoid you or anything, I'm just really --"

"Busy, yeah, you told me," Lance said brusquely. "And I don't care any more. You're meeting me for lunch today."

Justin felt his heart jitter a little with alarm. "Oh, dude," he started, "there's no way I can do that today. Seriously, I have so much work to do."

"I'm thinking 12:30 will work for me," Lance went on implacably, as if Justin hadn't spoken. "I like that pizza place around the corner from your office, the one that has it by the slice. And don't be late, because you're buying."

Justin leaned forward, his fingers digging painfully into the wood of his desk. "But, but, Lance," he said, realizing that he was close to stuttering. "I really --"

"Oh, hey," Lance interrupted again with a completely artificial cheerfulness that made Justin's eyes widen in alarm. "Did I tell you that I got the nicest e-mail from your mom the other day?"

Justin sputtered into silence, and Lance continued, sounding far too pleased with himself.

"No? Oh, I must've forgotten. Or maybe it's just because, you know, one of the things she asked me was if I'd seen you lately, and since I haven't, I really wasn't quite sure how to respond. She also asked me if we enjoyed the NBA finals, and what I think I'll do is ask her if she saw you on television at that playoff game."

Justin cleared his throat.

"Pizza. 12:30," Lance said smugly, and hung up.

Justin slammed his phone down and put his head into his hands.

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" . . . and then he set up for this shot from what seemed like center court, dude, and he was so close I felt like I could've reached out and touched his leg when he went up for that shot . . ."

Justin paused to take another huge bite of his pizza, aware of Lance's sharp green eyes on him. Lance was already finished with his salad and his pizza; he'd been sitting quietly across the table from Justin for half an hour, calmly eating his lunch while Justin talked incessantly, frenetically, about the basketball game. He waited until Justin's mouth was full before lifting an eyebrow and starting to speak.

"It does sound like you had a really, really great time," he said carefully. "But you have to know that I'm wondering what happened *after* --"

Justin waved a hand in the air, chewing as fast as he could so he could get the words out. "Seriously, man," he interrupted. "The crowd was starting to count down the clock and it sounded incredible, you know, everyone shouting FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE! And it was like a herd of stampeding elephants or something, seriously, dude, it was just the most amazing atmosphere . . ."

"Justin," Lance said more forcefully, and waited until Justin stopped talking and widened his eyes at him. "I want to know what happened after the game, Justin."

"Oh!" Justin said cheerfully, and now he took another bite and made Lance wait while he chewed and swallowed. "Oh, so, afterwards Chris said that the loser had to buy drinks, and so we went and had a drink. And then I headed home."

Lance eyed him skeptically. "You had a drink and then you went home."

Justin nodded emphatically. "Yeah. It was such a great night."

"Sounds like it." Lance watched Justin as he finished the last of his pizza. "Okay, so how's work? What's keeping you so busy these days that you don't have time to talk to your friends?"

"Hey, we're talking," Justin said defensively, and then launched into a complicated, high-speed speech about the manuscripts he was working on, his preparation for the upcoming list setting meeting, and every other thing he could possibly think of as they gathered up their garbage and left the restaurant. He didn't run out of things to say until they stood on the sidewalk, ready to part for their respective offices.

Justin was sweating. Talking so frantically about nothing was completely exhausting, but he'd prevented Lance from asking any questions that he didn't want to deal with, and hopefully, *hopefully* had convinced him that Justin was just fine. Which he was, he reminded himself. He was just fine, everything was just fine.

"You know," Lance said carefully, his face turned toward the afternoon traffic and not meeting Justin's eyes at all. "I'm sure that everything is going okay with you --"

"It is," Justin put in hurriedly. "Everything's great."

"-- but if there were things that weren't okay, if there was anything that was, uh, bothering you, or upsetting you --"

"No, no, nothing like that," Justin interrupted again. His palms were sweating.

"-- well, good, I'm glad to hear that," Lance said, his eyes on the street. "But if anything was, you know, not good -- you know you can talk to me." He turned, his eyes meeting Justin's seriously. "I mean, you know, if you want to talk about anything, I'm your friend. I'm not going to beat you up about it and say 'I told you so.' You know that, right?"

Justin deflated a little, the manic energy that had fueled him through lunch leaving him as his shoulders slumped. He rubbed his forehead, suddenly feeling unbearably weary. "I do know that," he said, subdued. "And I appreciate it, Lance. I do. I just really, really don't want to talk about it. Not right now."

Lance pulled his sunglasses from his shirt pocket and carefully slid them on. "You know, if you did, you might feel better," he offered, and smiled a little. "You always have before."

Justin sighed. "Maybe," he acknowledged tiredly. "But mostly I'm doing everything I can do to not think about it, you know?"

"Sure," Lance said quietly, and gave him a sympathetic smile. "I won't ask about this thing that you don't want to think about or talk about again. You need an ear, you know where to find me."

Justin felt a rush of relief and a surge of affection for his friend. "Thanks, man," he said gratefully. "I really appreciate that. Maybe you want to catch a movie or something Friday? Help me not think about it some more?"

Lance nodded, but he still looked almost pitying. "Sure," he said gently. "Give me a call, we'll go see whatever you want to see. This time," he added as Justin grinned.

"Okay, Lance," Justin said, turning to go. "Thanks again, man."

"No problem," Lance said, and slapped Justin on the arm as he turned away with an evil grin. "Except for replying to your mother's e-mail, I didn't have any plans on Friday anyway."

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JC walked down the hallway to Chris's office late in the day. Chris had left a voice mail right after lunch asking him to come check some design layouts, and JC had meant to do it, he really had, but then his assistant had rushed into his office with a letter in his hand and a worried look on his face, and the next couple of hours had been devoted to placating a nervous and difficult author who was getting bad advice from an agent and cold feet about signing his contract. After that, JC had started to head to the art department, but before he'd even reached the staircase, he'd gotten waylaid by someone from marketing who had an urgent question about an upcoming catalog, and that conversation had somehow segued into the number of author events the press was sponsoring next month and whether they had enough people to fully staff them. That had then bled into a general discussion of the marketing department's budget, and just like that, JC's afternoon had disappeared.

It had been hectic and frustrating, but it also left him feeling strangely energized. Lately he'd been craving any sort of stimulus to keep his mind busy, had sought out any number of problems and projects to address. JC was always efficient, but he'd been getting so much done these past few days that he was starting to surprise even himself, and that was saying something.

But it felt so good to have a mind crammed full of details, plans, and orders, so satisfying to know that he could keep moving at top speed throughout his days. That was exactly what JC wanted, because when he was home, no matter how late it was and how tired he was, his thoughts inevitably strayed to Justin, and the longer he let himself indulge in that, the closer to crazy JC became. He was fidgeting and restless in bed at night, unable to turn his mind off, unable to relax, focus, or do anything, in fact, except remember Justin. The instant JC closed his eyes, he recalled the careful, almost reverent way Justin had held him, the hopeful expression in his eyes, the rough, delighted tone of his voice when he had -- after they had --

And no matter what JC did, it was nearly impossible to stop these memories from flooding him. The fact that they turned him on was bad, but the way they made JC feel -- vulnerable and ragged -- was even worse.

JC had seen Justin several times in the past couple of weeks; their interactions had been brief but cordial, with JC relying rather heavily on everything he'd learned about business etiquette and decorum to get through them. He could be proper to the point of insanity -- he was very, very good at that -- but he still couldn't stop himself from feeling weak when he looked too long into Justin's eyes. It was bewildering. Everything was, lately.

JC tensed a little as he got closer to Chris's office, halfway expecting yet another urgent discussion or emergency situation to sweep him away again, but this time he made it, walked right up to Chris's half-closed door, rapped lightly on it, and then pushed his way in after Chris said "Enter!" in an overly dramatic and ridiculous tone of voice.

"Enter?" JC shot at him as he stepped inside, rolling his eyes and planning to rib the hell out of Chris -- until, that is, he saw Justin sitting solemnly across from Chris's desk, his eyes wide and curious as he turned to look up at JC.

"I didn't know you were in a meeting, "JC said immediately, forcing himself to look at Chris, to stop noticing the beautiful expanse of Justin's forearms, and the sweet, precise way he'd rolled up his shirt cuffs, the way he nervously twirled his pen between his long fingers.

Chris leaned back in his seat and gave JC a long, level look. "Yeah, I do that sometimes. Meet with people. Keeps the days interesting."

"I'll come find you tomorrow," JC said, and began to turn to leave, only just keeping himself from wincing as he watched Chris and Justin exchange a silent, meaningful glance. What the hell had the two of them been talking about, and why did Justin look so resigned?

"No, no -- don't do that," Chris finally said, and Justin started gathering up his things. "We were just about done here anyway, and I really do need to talk to you."

"Sorry to interrupt," JC offered, and Chris shrugged. Justin, meanwhile, was earnestly stacking a set of page proofs, frowning a little as he tried to line up the pages as neatly and seamlessly as possible. It was the kind of thing JC would have done, and had he not felt so excruciatingly stupid, he might have smiled at him, might even have made a little joke about anal-compulsive people and the distress that ragged edges in a pile of paper could cause. But instead JC stood there like an idiot and calmly waited.

"Take care, man," Justin said to Chris, his voice low and informal, and then looked carefully at JC and politely nodded his head before slowly exiting the office. Once he was gone, JC slowly turned around to close the door behind him -- not at all, of course, to get a glimpse of Justin as he walked down the hallway -- and then faced Chris and tried not to sigh.

"Well, then! I don't think that was awkward at all," Chris said brightly, his voice heavy with sarcasm as JC crossed the room.

Ignoring the comment completely, JC sat down in the chair Justin had just vacated. "I don't have much time," he began, and looked expectantly at Chris, hoping to force him to address business, not Justin.

But JC had never been good at controlling Chris, and when Chris leaned back in his chair and gave him a particularly evil look, all JC could do was widen his eyes a little and wait for it.

"Okay, so you blew it," Chris said, and really, did he have to look so weirdly pleased with himself? "I mean, knowing you as I do, I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised, but the speed with which you fucked this up astounds even me. Not even two weeks ago, the two of you were all happy and gaga eyed at the basketball game: now you can't even look at each other. What on earth did you do to him?"

JC looked pointedly at the layouts on Chris's desk. "So, shall we get started?"

"And of course I can't get hardly anything out of Justin, either, which is especially amazing when one factors in my considerable interrogation skills. What'd you do, Mr. Director -- force him to sign a non-disclosure agreement?"

"I'm here to discuss business, not my personal life," JC said a little impatiently, and Chris shrugged, then got up and went to the file cabinet to pull out a folder. But he wasn't done yet, and as he moved back to his chair, the harangue began again.

"You know, I worked pretty hard to make that evening possible, JC. I asked him to the game, I listened without laughing in your face when you made up your stupid little reason about why I should miss the dinner, and I -- most generously and selflessly, might I add, considering the fact that free alcohol was involved -- left quickly and quietly once the game was over. And I just -- hard work like that should be rewarded, you know?"

"Chris --" JC threatened, but Chris was on a roll now, flopping dramatically into his desk chair and rolling his eyes at him.

"And all I can get out of anyone is that you had drinks and then went home. It's downright frustrating."

"Maybe that's because that's all that happened." JC snapped. "Did you consider that? And Jesus, Chris -- I'll thank you to stay out of my social life in the future, all right?"

"Your social life? What kind of a joke is that?" Chris asked incredulously.

"I go out far more than you do, and you know it." About this, JC was certain. "Last week alone, I was out for dinner twice, at two parties, and --"

"Oh, that." Chris made a dismissive gesture, and tilted back in his chair. If he leaned back just a bit more, he would tip over, JC realized, and instantly sent up a prayer to the office chair gods to make that happen right now, and spectacularly.

Chris tilted back even further and still didn't fall, almost as if to mock him. "Need I even tell you that going out to dinners your parents force you into doesn't count?"

Suddenly, irrationally stung, JC began to defend himself. "They're not all -- I wasn't -- look. I had dinner with an old friend of mine, I went to the opening of an art show, I --"

"Okay, JC." Chris leaned forward again, his chair landing soundly on all four legs. "So let me ask you this, then: How many of these so-called fun outings had absolutely nothing to do with either Phoenix Press or the Antaeus Corporation? Hmm? How many fancy engagements did you have that didn't involve any talk about work at all?"

JC opened his mouth and then shut it. "I talk about work because work is important to me, but that doesn't mean it's my whole life."

"Right," Chris said, and then gave JC a look that was almost pitying, and that, that was the end; JC did not have to put up with this; this was not why he had come down here; he did not have to stand for this kind of treatment.

"All right, Chris, right now. The layouts," he said firmly, and to his credit, Chris did little more than raise an eyebrow before riffling through the papers on his desk to find the design they were supposed to discuss.

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JC's plans for the weekend included sleeping in, jogging in the park, and trying to carve out some time to relax. It had been a desperately busy and stressful week and although there wasn't time to take a trip out of town -- something that would have truly benefitted him -- he knew that catching up on sleep and spending some time outside would help his attitude a great deal.

And he was honest enough to admit to himself that the possibility of bumping into Justin, who also regularly jogged in the park on Saturday morning, was an attractive one. Even if the admission made him curse himself for being weak.

But a series of urgent telephone calls on Friday meant that the bulk of his weekend had been devoted to sorting out an overseas contract snafu between one of Antaeus's shipping subsidiaries in Venice and its supplier in Madrid -- something he could've done in his sleep just a few short months ago, but which now required more effort than he really felt able to give. He realized that he was completely tunnel-visioned, focusing solely on the press and its issues and -- here he thought about Justin again, with the usual accompanying confusion, self-disgust and frustration -- distractions. Not too long ago, dealing with overseas issues for the parent company had been JC's specialty. It was more than a little alarming to realize that the work that had once been such a source of pride to him had now become just one more distraction.

And now it was Tuesday morning. Monday had been a blur of meetings and tension-filled overseas conference calls, aggravated by the fact that he was still behind because of Friday's distractions, and because he hadn't done a single thing he'd hoped to do over the weekend. Even two cups of his private blend of Brazilian coffee hadn't lightened his foul mood, and as he perused the inter-office delivery from the music department he felt it, unbelievably, grow even darker. JC leafed through the document for the second time and drew a long, deep breath.

The music department's books had been losing money slowly but surely over the past few years; with few notable exceptions it seemed obvious to JC that their acquiring editors were not keeping up with current market demand. He'd formally requested a comprehensive five year plan for the department -- something not just for his own reference but to force its manager to think about current and future trends. His mouth tightened as he leafed through it yet again -- the report was not only a week late, but it was also shallow, poorly researched, and formatted in a messy and incomprehensible fashion. There was no excuse for such unacceptably slipshod work. He flipped to the last page and his mouth tightened in annoyance. Joey Fatone's signature was every bit as indecipherable as his thinking.

JC had instructed Joey to put this plan together himself and not to delegate it, and at least Joey had followed those instructions. JC grit his teeth. He would've bet his new custom Mercedes that this plan hadn't crossed Justin's desk. JC suspected that Justin had a clearer idea of the sort of acquisitions the music department should aim for, not to mention much more exacting standards when it came to his reports and paperwork.

He continued to stare unseeingly at the report while his mind wandered. It would be interesting to hear what Justin had to say about this report. His loyalty to Joey puzzled JC and made him angry, and showing Justin this report and asking a few questions would provide JC with a great deal of information -- he'd know by Justin's reactions whether or not Joey had conferred with him at all prior to its preparation, for one thing, and for another -- well, it would just be interesting to get Justin's take on the report.

But his temper roiled at the thought of Justin defending Joey again, and he resolutely pushed the thought out of his mind. He would control his temper, he told himself sternly. He would control it.

JC reached over and slammed the intercom button with a clenched fist and was only slightly gratified when his assistant answered instantly. "Ask Justin Timberlake to come in here," he said, and was pleased with how even his tone was.

"Mr. Chasez," Mark answered. "Mr. Timberlake isn't in the office today; he called in sick again."

"What do you mean again?" JC's voice was much sharper than he meant it to be and he paused to take another deep breath.

"I was talking to his secretary earlier," Mark's voice was very subdued; he'd picked up on JC's tension and was treading very carefully. "He said that Jus– Mr. Timberlake was out sick yesterday and today as well, but that he was calling in for his messages. Do you want me to try his home phone?"

JC's eyes flicked to the calendar on his computer screen. It was Tuesday morning. Justin had been out sick yesterday, and on Friday when he'd passed him in the hallway outside the kitchen Justin had been tight-lipped and silent. He'd refused to meet JC's eyes -- JC had felt the usual distressing combination of confusion and hurt and anger and had kept moving, ignoring Justin in favor of speaking pleasantly to the woman behind him. But after he'd turned into the main conference room he'd glanced back through the doors to see Justin frozen in the hallway and staring after him, his face pale and his eyes huge and dark. JC had

hesitated but Justin had turned immediately and disappeared down the hallway. He had not had the opportunity to see him since. Goddamn it.

"No, that will be all, Mark. Thank you." JC disconnected the intercom with the same clenched fist and stood up, giving in to the need to move. He sank his teeth into his lip thoughtfully as he paced around his desk and over to the window looking out at the city skyline. He clasped his hands behind him and tried to make sense of his jumbled thoughts.

Perhaps Justin truly was ill. Now that JC thought about it, he really had seemed pale on Friday, and it wasn't like him to miss work. He lived alone, JC knew. Did he have anyone to look after him? JC glanced at his desk -- at the folder with the infuriating and completely unacceptable five year plan, at the calendar delineating his very, very full day -- and then sat back down at his computer and pulled up Justin's human resources file.

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It took longer than it should have to reach Justin's neighborhood. Traffic was infuriatingly slow -- why were all these people on the streets? Didn't they have jobs? JC tapped his fingers restlessly on the seat beside him as the car maneuvered around a large delivery truck in front of the entrance to the building where Justin lived. JC instructed the driver to wait, grabbed the file, and pushed through the doors to the main lobby.

The lobby was small, but clean and well lit. There was no doorman or receptionist, but the directory seemed well maintained and there was a "J. Timberlake" in neat letters beside the numbers 302. JC lifted the phone and dialed, listening to the peculiar buzz as Justin's intercom alerted him to his visitor.

"Hello," Justin said, and for a moment JC was silent: the subdued, sexy voice on the other end almost sounded like it belonged to a stranger, not like someone he had, well, had sex with. Quite a bit of sex, actually, quite a bit of excellent sex.

"It's JC Chasez," he responded automatically and blinked at his own reflection in the glass. Why had he felt the need to announce himself so formally? Did he think Justin wouldn't recognize his voice?

Justin didn't answer, but after a long, tense moment the security door buzzed and JC hung up the intercom phone and pulled the heavy door open. The stairs were narrow and a little dark, but they'd been recently carpeted and the walls were clean and unmarked. He climbed easily up the three flights of stairs, holding the file with the music department's five year plan and thinking about nothing at all.

Justin was slouched in the doorway of his apartment, wearing faded blue sweats and a thin, stretched-out white tank top. The door was pulled closed behind him. He looked stiff and, as JC drew closer, flushed and feverish. There was a distracting amount of skin showing; Justin's shoulders were smooth and firm and there was hint of light colored hair arrowing down his chest beneath the loose neckline of his shirt. Then JC felt a moment of chagrin -- Justin looked clearly ill, and of course he was ill, he was not the type to miss work unless he was.

"What are you doing here?" Justin's voice was hoarse and low, as if it hurt to talk. He didn't seem inclined to invite JC in, and knowing that made JC suddenly determined to see the inside of Justin's home, even though a moment ago he'd been ready to offer an apology and leave.

"I was on my way to a meeting, and passing by your house," he improvised smoothly. "Since you're not in the office today, I wanted to get your take on this plan from your department." He watched Justin carefully and was almost proud of him when he pulled himself upright and automatically reached for the folder in JC's hands.

"The five year plan?" Justin asked, his brow wrinkling with concern, and JC pulled the folder out of Justin's reach, nodding pointedly at the still-closed door.

"Oh," Justin said, and wiped his hands on his pants as if they were sweaty. "Oh, I can't invite you in; I'm sorry, the place is such a mess." And now Justin was pink, the flush crawling across his face and down his neck and chest. "I've been sick," he added quietly, and JC smiled.

"It'll only take a minute," he said firmly, and waited, holding Justin's eyes until he reached behind him and pushed the door open.

"Yes, okay. Um, please excuse the mess," Justin said formally, and stood back to let JC precede him into the apartment.

Bright, was JC's first impression. Cheery, with floor to ceiling windows facing the morning sun, and blinds drawn all the way up. Justin didn't block them with any furniture either; the few pieces he had were pulled away and facing the windows. There was a medium sized television in the corner, and a small, perhaps fake fireplace on the wall to JC's right. A thick afghan was piled on a truly hideous orange couch, with a big mug of what looked like tea on the small coffee table beside it. The couch looked comfortable, and JC could almost see the warm imprint of Justin's body on the cushions. For a moment he was tempted to pick up the afghan and wrap Justin in it, pull it around his body and ease him down on that long, ugly couch, brush his hand over Justin's short hair and . . .

"Um. Would you like something to drink?" Justin was hovering behind him and JC came back to himself sharply.

"No, I don't want to disturb you while you're ill," he said automatically, and heard Justin sigh.

"Although you are," he said pointedly, and JC smothered a smile.

"I just want you to take a look at this," he said, handing the file to Justin and watching the way he flipped it open, the way his forehead furrowed as he looked at the table of contents and leafed through the text and spreadsheets, the way he started to chew on his soft, full lower lip. He was barefoot, JC noted. With some effort he stifled the urge to tell Justin to put some socks on.

He turned away politely as Justin sank onto the couch and frowned at the file, and took another sharp look around the tiny apartment. Utilitarian kitchen to the left, with two bar stools and no room for a dining room table. A book case was built in to the wall around the small fireplace, and there was a tiny hallway to the right with two doors that probably led to Justin's bedroom and bathroom. On the narrow mantle of the fireplace was a framed picture of what JC guessed was Justin's family, along with photos of what were likely friends. There was one of a very beautiful blonde girl with huge brown eyes and a big smile; JC felt his eyes narrow on it.

"Okay, wow," Justin said beside him. "This is really . . . god. You know, I can fix this," he said in a rush. I can totally . . . I have my laptop here, I'll have Joey email me the files and . . ."

"It's okay, Justin," JC said gently, and Justin lifted eyes huge with distress to his.

"It's not," he said urgently. "This was due more than a week ago, and to have it turned in to you like this -- I know there's no way you can use this. And I can fix it," he said, slamming the folder shut. "I know what needs to be done, and I can pull this together."

"I know you can. And if you weren't so obviously sick, I might ask you to do just that. Because this plan, in its present form? It's an embarrassment to you, and to everyone in your department who cares about what this press publishes." JC said quietly. He waited, watching as Justin digested what he said, what he meant, and saw his face crinkle with distress. "Take another look at it," he suggested smoothly. "I'm certain you'll agree."

Justin stood up and took a slow step closer to him, the folder hanging forgotten at his side, his eyes wide. "The thing is, JC, Joey is really good at a lot of things. I mean, I'm not just saying this because he's my friend, I just think . . ."

JC waited, his eyes steady.

"Fuck," Justin made a face of annoyance and swung away, taking a large step across the room and gesturing in frustration. "Could we, maybe -- just for a minute, could you not be my boss, here? Could you just, I don't know. Take off your jacket and shoes and sit down and not be my boss?"

JC struggled for a moment. He was surprised at how tempting the idea was. He could take off his jacket and his tie, roll up his sleeves and sit in that comfortable-looking chair by the window. He could rummage through Justin's tiny refrigerator for something to drink and sit down while Justin curled back up into his afghan, and they could talk about their jobs as if they didn't already know too much about each other's jobs. JC could talk about the man in the department who just wasn't cutting it, and Justin could talk about his friend who was having a rough time at work, and they could vent to each other and offer possible solutions, and be -- well, friends. And Justin was staring at him now, his beautiful and expressive blue eyes imploring JC to do just that.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," he said slowly, and stopped as Justin looked away, biting his lip furiously. "I mean, right now, I can't do that right now," he continued, and cursed himself. "You're sick, and I really do have a meeting," he said, automatically checking his watch. He

watched as Justin nodded slowly, his face rigidly under control, and took a deep breath. It was against his better judgment -- it was stupid and he was going to regret it -- but something about Justin's face pulled at him, made him do things that he wouldn't have considered just weeks before.

"But how about this? I'll call you later, and if you feel up to it, we can get together and maybe talk about these things." Justin looked up at him and smiled a little, and JC felt himself smile back. "I'd like your input on this plan, too. I'll pick up some take-out or something; you shouldn't go out," he finished up firmly, and as he turned back to the door he took the memory of Justin's smile and blue eyes with him.

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It was getting late by the time JC made his way back to Justin's side of the city, and he was of two minds about calling him. On one hand, he really wanted Justin's input on the music department's five year plan. It seemed obvious that without Justin's help, Joey was incapable of pulling a coherent report together. And JC suspected that Justin had a much better idea than his boss of the direction the department should be moving in.

On the other hand, he thought ruefully, Justin had made himself pretty clear during that bleak Sunday afternoon conversation after the basketball game. And JC showing up at his apartment with take-out could be construed in any number of inappropriate ways.

That thought alone would've decided him if JC hadn't remembered so very clearly the way Justin had behaved since that day: the long and intense looks he directed at JC when he thought JC wasn't paying attention, the way his cheeks turned pink when JC addressed him in meetings, the huge, bright smile he'd given JC the last time they'd run into each other at the park on a Saturday morning. Despite that conversation following the basketball game he certainly wasn't acting as if he didn't want anything to do with JC, which meant that maybe Justin was still interested. He resisted thinking about the last time he'd had Justin in his bed with a huge effort. JC was interested, too.

JC sighed and pulled out his cell phone. Justin had said that afternoon that he'd wanted JC to stay, to talk to him like he was his friend. Not his boss, not someone he'd fucked. A friend. JC didn't know if that could be done, but he guessed it was worth a try.

Justin answered the telephone like he'd sprinted for it, rushed and out of breath. When JC arrived at his apartment door a few minutes later he saw that Justin had showered and changed, and though he was still sniffling and hoarse, he was now somehow also devastating in track pants and a clean black t shirt. And he'd apparently spent a significant amount of time cleaning his apartment. JC frowned and thought of scolding him for exerting himself when he was ill, but then he cast another look around the now-immaculate living room and held his tongue. Justin had made an effort here; it seemed obvious that he cared what JC thought. It was a piece of evidence to file away.

JC had stopped at a clean-looking restaurant just up the block from Justin's apartment and arrived with bags full of containers of hot and sour soup and milder dishes that he thought would not upset Justin's stomach. Justin looked better, he thought as they unpacked the containers on the kitchen counter and Justin bustled around gathering plates and napkins. He

had color in his cheeks and his eyes, when they met JC's, were bright with pleasure, not feverish. He seemed a little nervous and JC couldn't help but smile at him.

They talked of very general things as they sat down to eat, and it was only after Justin had inhaled an entire container of soup and three vegetable egg rolls that he brought up the report.

"So, I read it, the whole thing," he said abruptly and without preamble, and JC quirked an eyebrow at him as he chewed his kung pao chicken. He waved his chopsticks at Justin to indicate that he should continue, and Justin got up to grab the file folder from the little computer desk in the corner of the living room. He busied himself with opening it and showing JC how the spreadsheets were incorrectly formatted and therefore somewhat misleading.

JC nodded seriously, his eyes steady on Justin's face as he talked animatedly about music in general and his department in particular for a few minutes. He'd wanted Joey to prepare the plan in order to get a firmer grasp of what was wrong with the music department, but it was Justin who seemed to have all the knowledge. And he had something else besides, something Joey had yet to truly demonstrate to JC -- the interest in developing the department's list, and the drive to move it forward. Although JC had told Joey not to delegate the entire preparation of the plan to Justin or anyone else, it was stupid and short-sighted of Joey not to have at least conferred with Justin about it.

"So let me ask you this," he said when Justin paused for breath. "Suppose this was a brand new assignment, suppose the director asked you, on your own, to develop this plan. How would you structure the music department's list for the upcoming year?"

Justin stared at him from across the table, his chopsticks frozen in mid-air. He seemed to be engaged in a powerful internal struggle and JC raised his eyebrows encouragingly. "For example," he said, and indicated the report again. "Would you allocate this much, a full 45%, to books on musicology?"

"No," Justin said slowly. "No, I wouldn't. Not that they aren't good, valuable books," he added in a rush, his eyes huge and earnest on JC's face. "Because they are, and the books Joey brings in, JC, they're the very best of the lot and they win awards and there are masters programs that use them as textbooks, and it's really very prestigious for the press to have books like that attached to it, wouldn't you agree?"

"I absolutely agree. I never said musicology wasn't important," JC answered quietly.

"Because it is," Justin said forthrightly, and now his cheeks were red. "But at the same time, I think 45% is too much. I think," he started, and then sighed miserably and JC felt almost sorry for him. "I think that the musicology books should be chosen very carefully, on a book by book basis. The right books on the subject can break even or even make a little bit of money, but by and large they're not books that do terrifically well unless they're on a mainstream sort of subject."

"I'd agree with you on that too," JC said mildly and Justin looked up, his face a little resentful.

"But we've had some that have sold very well," he reminded JC pointedly. "Books that have been widely reviewed and well-received and are hugely respected in their fields."

"Lately?" JC enquired politely, and Justin flushed.

"I'm just saying," he continued with dignity, "that the right books, chosen at the right time, can be a real asset to the music department."

"I'm not arguing with you, Justin," JC said, deliberately keeping his eyes on his food. "And I agree that 45% is too much to allocate for that kind of book."

"But once in a while there might be books that come along that would take up that much of the list," Justin said stubbornly. "I mean, it could happen that way, and if it did . . ." he trailed off and JC took pity on him.

"Well, if something like that happened, then room should be made for them," he said easily. "But allocating this much of the list to musicology and then having to hunt for quality books to fill it seems . . ."

"Short-sighted," Justin said, and his voice was very, very subdued. JC nodded matter-of-factly and changed the subject as they cleared away the remains of their meal. His mind was made up.

JC didn't stay much longer; Justin was pale and needed his rest, and the increasing temptation he felt to linger as the day grew darker and the apartment seemed to become warmer and more intimate was more than JC was willing to deal with. Justin became stiff and awkward as JC gathered up his coat and prepared to leave, stuffing his hands into his pockets and balling them into fists as he walked JC to the doorway.

"Thank you for dinner," he said quietly, his eyes trained on his feet.

"No problem," JC said, just as quietly. Tension stretched between them; he realized that Justin was standing very close to him, close enough for him to see his ridiculously long eyelashes as they swept down to hide his eyes, close enough for him to see the teeth marks in his lip as he bit into it. "You can get it next time," he said carefully, and held his breath to see how Justin would respond.

With a little bit of a blush and a big smile. In other words, gorgeously, as Justin almost always responded to anything JC said or did. It was painful to see, painful to be this close and not reach out and touch, and JC cursed himself for ever giving in to temptation and coming here, for ever being alone with Justin again.

"I'll be honest with you," Justin was saying, and JC dragged his attention from the curve of his lips. "It's going to take me more than a month to pay off my credit card from the last time I paid for dinner. I will definitely get it next time, but it'll be pizza. Or cereal," he said, laughing, and JC couldn't help but laugh with him even as he remembered with chagrin the meal at the Italian restaurant before the playoff game. He didn't recall it being that pricey, but of course expensive probably meant something very different to Justin. He cursed himself for being insensitive, and swore he'd make it up to Justin, and soon.

"You’re on," he said, looking up suddenly with a smile and catching Justin staring at him, the laughter falling from his face and replaced with a wistfulness that made JC catch his breath. He waited for Justin to say something, anything, but instead he stuffed a fist back into the pocket of his track pants and used the other one to open the door to his apartment.

"Take care of yourself," JC said as he moved out the door. Justin had a powerful effect on him; he was proud of himself for keeping his voice so steady.

"I’m feeling better tonight," Justin said from the doorway. "I’ll probably come in tomorrow."

"Well, only if you feel up to it," JC said, and rolled his eyes as he wondered when he’d started sounding like his mother. "I mean, good. Just don’t make the rest of your department sick."

Justin smiled at him, the dim light from the hallway making him look very young and very beautiful. "See you tomorrow, then," he said, and watched from his doorway as JC waved and headed, heart pounding, down the stairwell.

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Justin nervously adjusted his tie, staring blankly at the notes he'd prepared for the list-setting meeting. He'd gone over the list time and time again, making sure that each of the books he'd promised would be ready when they needed to be. His books were the trade books, the ones expected to sell more, so Justin had to have them to the manuscript editorial department early so they could move through editing, proof, and printing fast enough to be ready at the beginning of the season. It had been close in one or two instances -- he'd practically had to wrestle Thomas Kearney's manuscript out of his reluctant hands, for example -- but Justin had planned far in advance, had worked hard to shape his list, and now it was paying off.

He hoped. He had his own sense of when things should appear, but who knew what JC would think? Each time Justin thought he had JC's business sense figured out, JC threw him a curve; his mind was just as elastic as it was keen.

Ten minutes before the meeting, Joey knocked lightly on Justin's door. "Big day for you," he said, smiling. "This is the first time the rest of them will really get to see what you've brought for us, and I've got a feeling there are going to be a lot of impressed people in that room."

"Thanks, Joey," Justin said, but he couldn't grin and he couldn't express much pleasure, either, because his books only made up part of the picture -- for the music department to have a good showing at the meeting, Joey, too, would have to bring books to the table. All week Justin had expected to see Joey making calls to recalcitrant authors, reviewing final manuscripts, and charting out the season month by month, but Joey had been oddly serene and immobile. It was almost as if he were daydreaming through the week, and it made Justin very, very nervous. He couldn't exactly say anything about it, however; all Justin could do was get his own things in order and hope that his boss had done some serious, substantive work at home.

Joey glanced at the clock and grimaced. "Time to throw ourselves to the lion," he said, making a face.

"Right. Yeah," Justin said, and felt his heart try to pound its way out of his chest. *Please* have it together, he silently said to Joey. Please, please.

Joey laughed in delight as Justin stood up. "Look who pulled out the suit!"

Justin looked down at himself, bashful, then grinned. "Serious meeting, serious clothes," he said, then reached for his jacket, which he'd draped behind his chair. It was vain and quite possibly shallow, but he liked looking good, liked knowing that the gold in his hair looked particularly nice against the navy of his jacket and that his shoulders filled out his suit coat to perfection. He felt confident and poised, and if other people -- certain other people -- happened to notice as well, then it was all for the better.

Joey laughed again, then fondly punched Justin in the arm. "All right, killer," he said. "Let's go get 'em."

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Because this meeting made people nervous, the conference room was already pretty full when Justin got there. He saw almost all of the fiction department, the bulk of history, and then too, JC, who was in his usual place at the top of the table and having a low, whispered conversation with Elise Martin, probably about some smashing new novel they were going to win tons of awards for. For a few electrifying seconds, Justin let his eyes slide down JC's neck, let them linger on the curve of his jaw. He loved the way JC's hair twisted into riotous curls just before it brushed the back of his collar, the way he inclined his head when he was listening. Just then, JC was looking intently at Elise and speaking animatedly and purposefully -- whatever he was telling her, he wanted her to remember it. Elise was nodding very, very fast, her fingers tapping quickly on her knee. It was unlike her to look so flustered, but Justin could sympathize: being the focus of JC's rather considerable will could be an overwhelming experience whether you were talking about books with him or spread out on your back in the middle of his bed.

Jesus. That line of thought would have to be stopped at once. Justin returned his gaze to his notes and didn't look at JC anymore for a while.

"Justin, you look great!" a voice from across the table said, and Justin slowly lifted his head to see another fiction editor, Karen Warner, smiling at him, her eyes warm and appreciative.

Justin grinned back. "Thank you." Karen was pretty and kind, and he'd always enjoyed talking to her. In fact, had certain things been different, he might actually have asked her out.

But things were not different -- one thing in particular was very emphatically not different -- and indeed, even as he continued speaking with Karen, Justin felt the force of JC's stare on him. Slowly, cautiously, Justin turned his head just enough so he could meet JC's eyes: they were sharp and intense, and for a moment, Justin had difficulty breathing as a series of tangled thoughts, some painful, some wonderful, filled his mind. There was still so much he wanted from JC, so much he wanted for the two of them, and as JC continued looking at him, Justin felt himself actually beginning to blush.

And damn it, that was a mistake, that was a huge, embarrassing mistake -- he could not afford to behave in this fashion in front of JC, could not afford to lose his composure at work. Determined to show this to JC as well as to himself, Justin looked back at him with what he hoped was a calm, assured gaze. JC raised his eyebrows just a fraction, his mouth twisting into a half-smile, and then gathered his notes together, scanned the room, and said, "Let's get started, then."

The meeting began well: JC read the books off the list the department heads had compiled and then asked them to confirm that they would be ready; then, the manuscript editorial and production departments weighed in on whether they thought they could get the job done from a practical standpoint. Finally, marketing indicated when they'd like to see the book arrive. Everyone had copies of the list so everyone could follow along, and it was with great satisfaction that Justin saw JC check off his books one by one. He had done his job and he had done right by his authors: their books were accounted for and ready. He had also done well by his colleagues, and Justin could not help beaming when Derek Anderson, the head of manuscript editing, had smiled and told JC, "We never have to worry about Justin's books" when he inquired whether a certain manuscript had arrived.

"That doesn't surprise me," JC said absently, and it was only with the greatest of efforts that Justin prevented himself from meeting his eyes and grinning full-out.

As they moved into the middle of the list, however, the meeting became slightly more tense. When JC discovered that two trade history titles he'd been counting on weren't going to make the season at all, his face went dark and his eyes went brilliant, and then followed a series of quiet, relentless questions that left the editors responsible for those books cringing in shame. It was unbelievably awkward, and when Justin glanced in discomfort around the table, he saw the same unhappy look on many other faces as well.

"Okay," JC said calmly and deliberately once he was done with the recalcitrant editors, and then moved to the bottom part of the list and read off the first of Joey's titles. Justin looked steadily at his boss and prayed for something good to happen.

"Present and accounted for," Joey said. "I'll launch it in a week or so."

Derek sighed theatrically and firmly set his pen down on the table.

JC pushed his chair back from the table a bit, then leaned back and easily crossed his arms over his chest. "You might as well just say it out loud, Derek," he said in a calm voice, although no one in the room was fooled into thinking he wasn't annoyed.

"Joey, I can take late projects every so often, but this manuscript --" Derek, who was skinny and high strung, waved his hands in a wild, complicated gesture of defeat. "It's over nine hundred pages long, it's full of musical examples, and I just -- well. I think we might be able to get it done still, but I have to have it soon, okay? Definitely sooner than two weeks."

"You know, I've actually been holding it back because of permissions issues," Joey said, smiling, amazingly unapologetic. "I know how much you hate those."

"Well, are they close to being resolved?" Derek asked carefully. "Because if they're in process, we could at least try to --"

"Absolutely not," JC said flatly. "It's not Derek's job to do that, and I'm not going to give him additional responsibilities on a book that's already late. Joey, if you don't have it to him by the end of next week -- with all the permissions covered -- then it drops from the list."

Joey stared at JC in amazement. "But it's the very last month of the season," he said. "There are always a few books that don't quite make the deadline. That's how it's always worked before, and we've always come out okay."

"No, Joey -- you've come out okay," JC said coldly. "But it's not working out so well for your colleagues. Again and again you drop off shoddy manuscripts full of problems, then expect other departments to make up for your incompetence. That's not acceptable. That's not going to happen any longer."

His face red, Joey leaned back in his chair and stewed, obviously furious but not willing to say anything else out loud. Justin tried and failed to catch his eye, then miserably picked up his pen and began doodling so he'd have something to do with his hands. But he couldn't not look up when JC spoke again.

"Derek, you are not to accept that manuscript unless it's on your desk in full and final form by next Friday. Is that understood?"

Derek's eyes widened and he gesticulated in frenzied fashion, anxiety radiating through his body. He and Joey were good friends, Justin knew, and this must be very difficult for him.

"Okay, yes. I understand," he finally said after JC stared levelly at him for several uncomfortable seconds.

"All right, then," JC said, satisfied, and read off the next few titles -- history books, all of which were in. Then he got to the second of Joey's books, which was already in manuscript editing, and everyone in the room relaxed a little.

Justin looked anxiously down at the list. There were a few novels, a memoir, something from the psychology list, and then three more of Joey's books, which made his chest grow tight. He was pretty sure that none of these was ready, and he didn't even want to think about what JC was going to do about it.

JC read the first of them. "Okay, so I've seen absolutely nothing on this. Where is it?" he evenly asked, and sat back in his chair a little and waited, and Justin almost hated him for being so beautiful and so terrifying at once.

"That's probably because it's not in house yet," Joey said matter-of-factly.

"Okay," JC said very slowly, drawing the word into a horrible, long expression of disdain. "So when did you plan on receiving it?"

Joey stared out the window for a moment, trying to remember, and despite the fact that part of him sympathized with Joey, Justin also felt a surge of anger as he looked at him. Why hadn't he prepared? Why hadn't he done a single thing to help himself?

"I think the final manuscript's due back in a couple of weeks," Joey finally offered.

"What do you mean you think it's due?" JC said incredulously, and Justin had to lower his head and close his eyes -- it was simply too difficult to watch either JC or Joey. "I don't know how you've been used to doing business in the past, but from now on, it is not acceptable to tell either me or your colleagues that you *think* your book is ready. It is not acceptable to waste our time like that."

That remark was met with a long, horrible silence, during which time Justin sank teeth into his lower lip and wished desperately that he were anywhere else on the planet than in this room.

"I'm sorry, I really am, but I just don't know yet," Joey said amiably, and seemingly unconcerned, and then Justin did look at JC, watched as his mouth went into a tight, angry line and his eyes flashed.

This was it, Justin thought, his head pounding and his face starting to heat up. If he didn't say something right now, JC was going to kill Joey.

"I think what Joey means to say is --"

JC cut his eyes toward Justin without turning his head, giving him a cold, sharp glance. "Let Joey speak for himself," he said, his voice brutal and hard. Justin winced and fell silent, and now he knew that his face was red.

"Actually, I really don't have anything to say at this time," Joey muttered with just a hint of belligerence in his voice.

JC locked eyes with Joey down the length of the table and everyone and everything in the room seemed caught in suspended animation. "Give me one good reason not to fire you," JC said quietly. "Right now."

Joey sat silent and motionless and stared back at JC, his jaw clenched. An unbearable silence filled the room.

"That's what I thought," JC answered, disgusted, and then sat back in his chair and spoke in a low, deadly voice. "It's obvious you're not prepared for this meeting, so I want you to leave. I can't even look at you right now."

As Joey slowly pushed his chair back and stood up, JC went back to the list as if nothing had happened, seemingly unaware of the looks of shock everyone else in the room was giving him. Justin dragged sweaty hands over his thighs and tried yet again to collect himself. The worst meeting of his life, and he'd hardly even spoken.

August

August

Another Saturday afternoon, another day in the office. JC pushed his chair back from his desk and rubbed his eyes, then stared blearily at the manuscript on his desk. It was something Justin had asked him to review: he thought it had great trade potential and wanted authority to offer a higher than usual advance, and so JC had skimmed it carefully and with a critical eye. Like all the books Justin brought in, it was interesting, but there was something wrong with it, something JC couldn't quite put a finger on. Scowling, he got up from his chair and walked to the window. It was a gray and almost chilly day and the city was deserted, a feeling that was enhanced by the fact that JC was pretty sure he was the only person at the press right now.

That was why he got the big bucks, he reminded himself, and smiled wryly at the glass. In truth, he'd taken a rather considerable pay cut when he'd decided to come to Phoenix Press instead of continuing with acquisitions and mergers for Antaeus -- it was his grandfather's way of telling him that he couldn't carry on like this for too long.

And while part of him knew that his grandfather was right, another part of JC regretted that he wasn't going to be able to stay at the press forever. He had enjoyed working at Phoenix far more than he'd thought he would: the job was stimulating in a way he hadn't expected it to be, and the people he worked with -- although there were a few notable exceptions -- were, too.

Very stimulating in some cases, and JC couldn't hold back the sudden welling of desire, affection, and confusion that now always hit him when he thought about Justin. Things between them were so tangled, so dense, and although JC reassured himself daily that the right thing to do was to keep the distance that they had awkwardly agreed to, that didn't help the almost desperate sort of longing JC felt every time he looked into Justin's beautiful, deep eyes and caught the almost wistful expression in them. No matter what he did to try to quell the feeling, JC still needed Justin.

But that truth stood right alongside a second one: the fact that given their jobs and their relative position in the power hierarchy at the press, it would be difficult at best for them to be together. Really, it was unfair. JC was guarded and cautious with his heart, slow to acknowledge the things it told him and even slower, sometimes, to act on them. And now here he was, pretty much certain of what his heart wanted -- and yet he was unable to act on it.

JC stepped back from the window and sat in his chair again, sighing. This was definitely not where he wanted his thoughts to be. Fiercely smoothing his hair back from his face, JC once more forced his attention to the manuscript in front of him and opened a word processing document. He was going to pull his thoughts together, write Justin a memo, and then be done.

Half an hour later, JC printed out three pages and scanned them with a sense of satisfaction. He'd nailed it exactly, had given a clear analysis of the book and its faults and then had offered Justin several possible ways of proceeding with it. JC grabbed the manuscript in question, slipped the memo under the rubber band holding it together, then headed for the staircase and Justin's empty office. He'd leave it on Justin's desk so he'd see it first thing on Monday morning.

The light in Justin's office was off and JC didn't want to stumble through it, so he moved carefully to the wall and felt around until he found the light switch, then headed straight for Justin's desk. Justin kept his office immaculate; his sense of organization and order were very similar to JC's, in fact, and as he moved through the room, an embarrassing sense of comfort and affection flooded JC. Justin hadn't done too much in the way of decorating, but on his wall were a few black-and-white prints of jazz artists, and he'd also stuck the cover comps for some of his upcoming books on his bulletin board.

As JC rounded Justin's desk he, glanced absently at it, then smiled a little before he could help himself. Justin might be collected and professional at work, but he certainly wasn't above having pictures of his mother in his office. Pausing to put the manuscript down, JC leaned in to examine the photograph. It was taken outside of a small but neat house, probably in Tennessee, JC decided. In it, Justin was smiling brilliantly and proudly, an arm slung fondly over his mother's shoulders; she, too, was beaming. It must have been a happy day for them, whatever it was. JC quirked his mouth as he noted Justin's mom's wild, curly hair. It was pretty obvious where Justin got that.

Bending over to look at the photograph was going to put a crick in his neck -- it made much more sense to sit in Justin's chair, and so JC settled himself there. It was much less comfortable (and expensive) than the one in his own office, but he supposed it sufficed for a junior editor. JC swiveled slowly to the left, and then to the right, eyes traveling over the manuscripts stacked neatly by season on the shelves, then moving back to the desk to note the empty In tray. Of course Justin would not leave unresolved business right before a weekend -- that just wasn't like him.

JC closed his eyes for just a second and breathed in -- he was pretty sure he could smell a hint of Justin's cologne. On a small shelf behind the desk was a neatly folded sweatshirt that would also smell very much like him, JC decided, though he certainly wasn't going to pick it up and check. That wasn't why he was here -- he was dropping off some papers for a colleague, not mooning over things that were never going to happen.

As he looked out the window by the door, JC imagined Justin sitting in this same place, plotting how to pitch his books or speaking earnestly and cleverly with his coworkers and authors. It was such a pleasure to work with him, to know him, to be near him.

Near him indeed. JC relaxed into the chair, thoughtful, and for just a few moments let himself remember Justin spread out before him in his bed, his body trembling with anticipation, his voice low as he urged JC to move forward, to thrust deeper. God, god, god. With a heavy sigh, JC leaned forward and resumed looking at Justin's things.

On a yellow pad right next to his keyboard was a to do list with Monday's date written neatly at the top -- Justin must write one up every night before he left work. As he scanned it, JC

nodded in recognition: on the right were long-term goals, on the left were more immediate, pragmatic responsibilities -- it was very much how he planned his own days, and he knew from direct experience that the system worked for Justin: very rarely was he ever caught unprepared or unable to do what was asked of him.

By the to do list was a stack of folders; JC quickly scanned the labels and saw that even though they'd only just closed the last list, Justin was already planning for the new one. He was really so good, was going to be one hell of an editor one day, and probably much more than that if he continued on like he had been. It was a pleasure to watch him, a pleasure to see him developing. Had he planned to be at this press for longer than a single year, JC would have begun to groom him for a more senior managerial position -- he was young yet, but he could probably handle it. But that, of course, was never going to happen. JC was never going to know exactly how Justin's career turned out.

He could learn, however, about Justin's upcoming week. Leaning forward in the chair, JC glanced at Justin's calendar, not looking too closely, because he was already on the verge of a serious breach of privacy here, but just . . . getting a general sense of how Justin had been organizing his time.

There was a mention of a meeting they'd had two days ago, and the week before that, a small scribbled note that read "get MS to JC ASAP." His face reddening a bit, JC tentatively flipped the page back to the previous month to check the day they had gone to the playoff game. As his eyes came to rest on a small red star drawn in the corner with "JC" written next to it in very small letters. JC wrinkled his brow in amazement, and then felt heat start to spread slowly through his body. So Justin, too, had been thinking about what had happened between them. But if he'd been doing that, then why hadn't he . . .

Control, JC thought, staring at it, and then quickly flipped back to August again. He was in this office to drop off the manuscript and then leave, and that was what he was going to do. He'd just write a quick note at the top of the memo, then get the hell out. JC grabbed a ball point pen from the desk, wincing a little because it was cheap and horrible, then scrawled something fast and easy and quickly stood up. He had to get out of this room, had to get as far away from it as possible, and soon.

As he strode quickly back up the spiral staircase to his own office, JC swore quietly and under his breath. This whole affair with Justin had been a colossal mistake -- in sleeping with him again, he'd violated not only his own ethical code but had also furthered a ridiculous, unrealistic fantasy, one that was detrimental to his own well being. He and Justin could not be together -- they were not going to have a relationship, and they were not going to engage in any further sexual activity. It was unpleasant, but it was reality -- it was JC's reality.

Now, if he could only convince himself of that.

Back in his office, JC shut down his computer, then looked grimly out the window one last time. What he really needed to do was get out, talk to some old friends, do something, anything, to distract himself from daydreaming about things he could not have. His face set with determination, he picked up his cell phone and scrolled down until he found the number he was looking for.

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Ten o'clock on a Saturday night. Justin cast aside the manuscript in his lap, looked in frustration around his quiet, still apartment, and sighed. He should be out having fun, should be laughing, drinking, and talking to others, not devoting every waking moment of his life to either working for Phoenix Press or daydreaming about its director. He loved his job, but he wasn't about to let it take over -- and he was obsessed with JC, but he certainly couldn't let him take over. Not with the way things were going -- or not going -- in that direction.

His face reddening, Justin grabbed his phone, dialed Lance, and waited. When Lance had phoned earlier in the day to ask him to go out, Justin had turned him down; Justin now hoped desperately there was still time to catch him. Lance's phone rolled over to voice mail, however, and Justin ended the call in disgust.

Alone on a Saturday, preoccupied with an unattainable man: this could not be his life. This was not his life. He should go out, not necessarily to pick someone up, because Justin was pretty sure he wasn't quite yet ready to sleep with anyone who wasn't JC, but he could go to a bar, enjoy a drink, and simply take pleasure in being out of the house. He might not be a well-adjusted person at this point in his life, but he could certainly act like one.

Lance had mentioned a bar to him the other night -- a place that was known for its elegant, wealthy clientele, a place where you could actually talk to people without having to fight the dance crowd. It sounded perfect -- intimate and comfortable.

"Given your newfound taste for rather . . . expensive men," Lance had said, his eyes sparkling with mischief, "you definitely should try going there, Justin. I'll bet you could reel in another CEO in five seconds flat."

That conversation had ended in sniping, but Justin hadn't forgotten the address of this place, and he wasn't about to let Lance's teasing stop him from trying it out. There was absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to go to a nice place, and after the work week he'd just had, with Joey moping about and JC sending confusing, unreadable glances his way and laser-sharp ones at everyone else, Justin thought he deserved a little bit of relaxation and amusement.

The bar was everything Lance had said it would be: it was quiet, understated, and impressive, full of brass, blonde wood, and several extremely good looking people. It wasn't quite a gay bar, but there were several gay people there, and as he headed languidly across the room to order a drink, Justin felt several curious glances cast his way.

Justin ordered a gin and tonic, then took a seat where he could watch people. He half expected to see Lance here, but his first look around the room revealed no such luck. That was fine -- after all, he was here to relax and think, not necessarily to socialize.

His drink was expensive, dry, and good. Justin shuddered faintly in pleasure as it slid down his throat, then started to let the tension of the week evaporate. God, there were so many different men here, so many kinds of beauty -- it was amazing, really, how many really gorgeous guys there were in the world. It was beyond stupid to limit oneself to a single person, much less a single difficult and distant person. Justin looked almost defiantly around the room again. If he could find someone here, he might be able to stop mooning over JC.

So when his eyes fell on JC standing languidly by the wall, Justin couldn't help but moan quietly to himself and wonder whether the entire world were conspiring against him. If he were truly meant to move on, then why would JC be here? If he were supposed to find someone new and forget all about JC, then why would JC look so heartbreakingly beautiful in that thin gray sweater, and why would his skin be glowing and his hair curling in lazy, sexy swirls around his face? It was almost as if the universe itself wanted them to be together.

Or something. Justin was on his second drink now, and everything was seeming kind of dreamlike and connected, and he knew he probably shouldn't trust himself. And to boot, JC was most definitely not standing there alone -- he was across from someone, and he was smiling and nodding at him. It really didn't matter that Justin couldn't see the other guy's face, because he knew instinctively what it must look like -- no one could look anything but stunned when JC drew on his considerable reserve of charm.

It was oddly painful to see JC with someone else, to see him devoting to a stranger the sort of energy and focus he'd once given to Justin. Because this was a fairly formal setting and because this was JC, he wasn't working full-out at it -- yet -- but there was little question that once he got going, the lucky man in front of him was going to be in for an incredible night.

If, that is, he wasn't kicked out the next morning.

Justin frowned. That was it. That was definitely it. He wasn't here to watch this, and he certainly wasn't about to let JC, who was obviously well along the way to a conquest, see him alone. If he had any self-respect at all, Justin would get up right now and leave this bar, would stop staring in admiration and jealousy at the way JC moved, the way JC talked, the way JC picked people up. It was just like at his party so long ago -- he was so fucking good, so perfectly seductive and hot and confident, and it was --

Justin shook his head unhappily. Actually, the only real wonder was that he was so hurt to see this happening. He should have known that JC would move on, should have known that JC would marshal his considerable ability to compartmentalize and simply put aside everything that had happened between him and Justin. Again it occurred to Justin that he really, really, really should leave, but something held him back, kept him glued to his seat with his head bowed a bit and his torso angled in an almost uncomfortable fashion so that JC, were he to look in Justin's direction, would not see him.

Actually, it would be good to watch this, good to see JC pick up someone else. Perhaps seeing JC doing that himself as well would get it into his head once and for all that hope in that direction was ridiculous. Yes. It would be . . . therapy of sorts to watch this.

Painful therapy -- very painful therapy, Justin thought a moment later as he watched JC's eyes sparkling with amusement, saw how easy and sure his grin was.

Justin reached for his drink, took a deep swallow, and concentrated once more on not looking in JC's direction. He had come into this bar hopeful and confident -- he needed to get back to that state of mind. Once more, he began looking carefully around the room; only this time, he allowed himself to check out faces.

Justin had just about decided to talk either to the tall blonde guy with the dark brown eyes who had winked at him a moment ago or to move over to the dark, sexy guy standing at the other end of the bar, when a waitress suddenly came up to him.

"I have a drink for you from the gentleman over there," she said in a low voice, smiling and looking pointedly at the part of the room where JC had been standing. Before he could help himself, Justin eagerly lifted his head to follow her eyes, and then came close to swearing in disappointment. JC was nowhere to be seen, and smiling across the room at him was a very nice looking guy who seemed friendly enough but definitely wasn't Justin's type.

"Um, yeah. Thanks," he told the waitress, then nodded and smiled at the guy while she set the drink before him. Of course, given the supreme, horrible luck that was plaguing him on this given night, it was a glass of champagne, yet another thing to remind him that he did not have JC, would not have JC. Once again, Justin looked across the room -- once again, he did not see JC.

Well, there was no point in wasting good champagne, even if it wasn't from the person he wanted it to be from. With a tiny sigh, Justin picked up the glass, took a sip, and then lowered his head to savor it. So good -- even on top of gin, it was so, so good.

"Good evening," a quiet voice said from behind him, and Justin froze, his hands curling involuntarily into fists and his eyes growing large.

"JC, hey," he said, turning around and trying desperately not to stare, not to look too hungry, too delighted, too relieved at seeing him.

"What brings you here?" JC asked, and there was something almost annoyed in his voice, something strangely possessive. Justin cleared his throat and tried to clear his head.

"I'm just -- you know. Out to have some fun," he said, then blushed as JC's gaze deepened, grew even more intent.

"With anyone in particular?" The question was asked lightly, but Justin could hear a certain amount of steel behind it, and he came close to trembling as he absorbed it.

"No, not really, but I see you're not alone," Justin shot back just a little bitterly and then widened his eyes in amazement as JC grinned at him.

"Careful now -- that almost sounds jealous," JC said very gently, and Justin bit his lip, because JC was so beautiful tonight, so absolutely perfect with his relaxed, lazy grin and his sparkling eyes. And oh -- it was all going to happen again if he wasn't careful here.

"Well, I'm -- I --" Justin said, and then gave up, gave it all up, and simply looked deep into JC's eyes and said, "It's true, JC. I might not have a right to feel jealous, but I don't want you with other people, either."

JC's eyes darkened and he leaned in a little. "How's the drink?" he murmured.

"I -- good, yes." Justin flushed slightly. "And I just thanked some stranger across the room for it."

JC quirked his mouth in amusement, and goddamn it, it was the party again, it was JC's kitchen, it was the private room at JC's exclusive club -- it was every hot, perfect moment he'd ever had with JC wrapped into one. "Well, I hope he was appreciative."

Justin laughed uncomfortably, then fell silent as he tried to figure out why JC was approaching him like this, what any of this could mean.

"Would you like to sit for a while?" JC asked, beckoning to an empty booth across the room.

Justin looked hard at him and felt his head beginning to spin. "I -- "

"Please," JC said, and now his voice was a little less confident, a little less cajoling. "I think we need to talk."

"I -- sure. Sure," Justin said, and then took a deep breath, stood up, and followed JC across the room.

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His thoughts were disjointed and he was on the verge of shivering, but JC managed to keep it in check, managed somehow to walk casually across the room with Justin, taking some consolation in the fact that he, too, looked nervous.

The very last thing JC had expected when coming into the bar tonight was to see Justin -- and even less than that, to see Justin giving a slow, flirtatious smile to a man who was not him, to see his lovely eyes directed at someone else entirely. It had been so maddening, so completely shocking, that JC had stopped talking to Jason in midsentence, his composure utterly gone along with his peace of mind.

"JC, what's wrong?" Jason had asked, and then grinned as he'd followed JC's eyes across the room. "Oh, I get it. Only half an hour into an evening with your straight friend and you're already itching to get away."

"I, no. It's --" JC had begun and then sighed as Jason gave him a pointed look. Like Chris, Jason knew him far too well.

"Okay, okay. I just -- that's someone I . . . well. Someone I work with."

"Someone you have feelings for?" Jason had asked, and JC had felt a rush of embarrassment so intense he wasn't sure he was going to survive it, because if he had become that obvious, then he was doomed, truly doomed.

"Okay, so you're not going to answer that," Jason had added a few seconds later, his voice low with amusement. "But you also don't seem to be able to stop looking at the man of the hour, so I guess I'll have to draw my own conclusions."

JC was about to retort to that when he saw someone across the room looking slowly and purposefully at Justin, saw him start to make his way across the floor toward him, his face full of hope and expectation -- and then a rush of fury and disbelief so strong it almost made him stagger flooded JC. There was no way in hell he was going to let someone else near Justin -- no way in hell he was going to -- no way he would let Justin --

And then the fear hit, because what if that was what Justin wanted? What if JC had blown it? What if Justin was ready to move on? The thought was unbearable, and it hurt more than JC had thought possible. JC shifted awkwardly on his feet, looked miserably over at Jason, and sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, hating that he was exposing himself like this but unable to ignore the knot of anxiety and jealousy tightening in his stomach, becoming more painful by the second. "I'm sorry, Jason, but I have to -- I have --"

When Jason's hand tightened on his arm, JC looked at him in surprise, and when he caught the look of understanding and almost pity in his eyes, JC felt his face begin to burn.

"I don't think I've ever seen you like this," Jason had said, his voice low and quite possibly tinged with humor. "The great JC Chasez speechless over another man."

"You can just shut the fuck --" JC began, but Jason was too quick; Jason knew him far too well.

"I won't ask you who he is right now, because judging from the looks of him, he's not going to be alone too much longer. So go on, then," he said, punching him lightly in the arm, and grinned. "You can give me full report later."

He was too distraught even to snap at Jason, JC realized with some alarm, and then sighed inwardly and bid him goodbye before heading straight for the next waitress he saw and ordering Justin a glass of his favorite champagne.

And now here they were -- and Justin was looking curiously at him, his eyes deep and lovely under his lashes, his beautiful mouth a little dark from the cool champagne JC had bought him, and it was simply not possible to be apart from him, not anymore, JC realized even as his stomach began to clench in fear. He had to move in now, had to try to make him his, because life without him was no longer tenable.

Once in the booth, Justin sat back and looked at him, his color a little high, his chest maybe moving up and down a little more quickly than it usually did. JC felt his own nervousness increase in response and anxiously gripped his thighs under the table. He had to make this work. If he tried and failed, it would be excruciating, but if he didn't try at all, he'd never forgive himself. Shifting uneasily in his seat, JC took a breath, bit his lip, and then looked straight into Justin's eyes and started to broker the most important deal of his life.

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As JC looked intently at him, Justin took a long, unsteady breath and murmured, "Another special occasion?" and then widened his eyes, because underneath the table, JC had just slid

his foot between Justin's.

"No," JC softly said, nudging him under the table, his eyes dark and purposeful. "This is something I want to do again and again, something I need to do again and again. With you. I want you, Justin."

Justin looked down, his face hot, and then slowly lifted his head again to meet JC's eyes, and he couldn't believe this was happening, couldn't believe they were actually on the brink of this.

"And I don't --" JC sighed, then sat back for a moment. "I mean all of it, Justin, okay? The talking, the spending time together, the whole deal. Because right now, I need -- I just. It's necessary for me, and I think --"

Justin almost sighed at the longing and the uncertainty in JC's eyes, but he held it in -- merely sat as still as he could and felt his heart begin to wrench with joy.

"And I think -- or, I mean, I hope -- you feel the same," JC quickly finished, clearly caught on the painful edge of embarrassment and hope, and Justin didn't think it was possible to be this happy -- hadn't even known he'd held such capacity for delight.

"I do. You know I do," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion and wanting, and then flushed in pleasure as JC smiled almost shyly at him.

"I -- good, then. Good." JC looked a little stunned now, too, and for a moment the two of them sat in ridiculous, happy silence and simply looked at each other.

When he was finally able to speak again, Justin knew he was going to make a mess of it, but the instant he got the faltering words out, JC slid his hand across the table, entwined their fingers, then squeezed tightly, intimately, and murmured, "Yes. Your place sounds great."

"So come on then," Justin whispered into his ear, and then smiled and led JC out of the booth and toward the door.

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"Ready?" Justin asked, and JC smiled at him across the back seat of the taxi before opening the door and getting out of the car.

During the elevator ride, Justin slid an arm around JC's waist just to see what it felt like; JC looked hard at him for just a second before slowly leaning in to kiss him on the mouth. Justin very nearly swayed into him, pushed him into the wall of the elevator, and forced him into a series of long, deep kisses, but then they were on Justin's floor and walking down the hallway to his apartment, and he had to flounder around in his pockets for his keys.

JC was smiling again -- in the past half an hour he'd probably smiled at Justin as many times as he had in their entire previous acquaintance. As was his way, JC was emanating both calm and intensity, and his eyes were bright and clear. It was extremely difficult to pay attention to anything else, but somehow Justin managed focus enough to unlock his front door.

"It's in much better shape than it was the last time you were here," he said a little gruffly as he swung the door inward and then flicked on a couple of lights. JC followed him in, then stood still, eyes sweeping the room, and for a moment Justin felt uncertain, wondered what it was JC was seeing and what he was thinking.

"You know, people who own orange couches probably shouldn't offer decorating opinions," JC finally said.

"You," Justin said, moving carefully across the room until he was standing right in front of JC, "are never going to forget that remark, are you?"

JC slid arms around Justin's waist. "No," he whispered, and then leaned in to kiss the side of Justin's neck, his mouth slow and deliberate. Justin tilted his head and sighed, his skin hypersensitive under JC's lips, his body beginning to tense as pleasure slowly radiated through him. Very soon he was going to be quivering, utterly undone just from a few kisses -- JC always did this to him.

"JC," he breathed, trying to pull back before he was unable to speak.

"I know," JC softly said, his eyes brilliant and sharp in the semidarkness.

"Do you have any idea how long I've wanted --"

"Yes," JC interrupted, his voice firm. "Because I've wanted it just as long."

"And now here we are," Justin murmured.

"Yes." JC looked expectantly at Justin, and Justin shivered a little. He had JC in his apartment, and judging from the look on his face, it was going to be a long, pleasurable night. He almost wanted to spend forever in this lovely, anticipatory state.

JC, however, wasn't going to let that happen. "Why don't you give me a tour of the place?" he suggested, his voice low, his eyes trained on Justin's mouth

"Yeah," Justin breathed, so caught up by the intensity of JC's gaze that he hardly heard his request.

"Justin, a tour," JC prompted him.

"A tour? Oh!" Justin looked at JC in puzzlement. "Basically, you've already seen it all. I mean, other than where we are right now, there's not a lot else other than -- oh."

"Oh." JC leaned in and caught Justin's earlobe between his teeth. "And that's the last thing I'm going to spell out for you right now, so show me. Now."

"I'm sorry, I just--" Justin began, then drew in a sharp breath as JC pushed him gently but insistently toward the hallway, toward the bedroom.

"Right," Justin murmured, then took JC's hand and led him back, then watched again as JC took in his room, as he gradually familiarized himself with his surroundings, methodical,

reserved, and gorgeous. Justin sat on the edge of the bed and took off his shoes, then leaned back a bit and waited.

"Any more decorating comments?" Justin tried to say lightly, but his voice came out hoarse and hungry.

"I certainly like the decorator," JC said appreciatively, genuinely, and Justin lowered his eyes for a split second as the wanting and the need in him surged to nearly unbearable levels.

"JC," he said. "Come here. Come here right now."

It took only a second for JC to close the gap between them and only a second more for Justin to grab his arm and urge him to sit next to him, but they kissed slowly and sweetly, JC coaxing soft moans from Justin, Justin quietly, busily working hands under JC's sweater.

Slow -- it was so slow, but it wasn't agonizing; it felt right to let JC ease him onto his back, and more right still to look up into JC's eyes and breathe rapidly as JC lightly ran a hand over the fabric of his shirt, down his chest and to his stomach and then back up again. Justin made a small, hungry noise, and arched his back, looking longingly up at JC's throat, his mouth, and then down at his slowly moving hand.

"So beautiful," JC murmured, and traced a figure eight on Justin's abdomen. "So beautiful, and I want this to be perfect for you."

"It will be--" Justin shakily began, then let go of the sentence and eagerly opened his mouth as JC leaned over to kiss him, his mouth hot and coaxing.

"Anything you want, Justin," JC murmured when he lifted his head. "I'll give you anything."

Justin couldn't stop the amazed, pleased smile from spreading across his face, couldn't resist the urge to pull JC back down for another long series of kisses. And then, when his lips were hovering right over JC's earlobe, Justin murmured, "You, inside of me. That's what I want."

JC shivered and then gently curled fingers into the hem of Justin's shirt, drawing the fabric up first an inch and then a few more and then several more still until he'd bared a good amount of Justin's abdomen and chest.

"That's what you'll get then," he whispered, and it was all Justin could do not to whimper in longing.

"To start out with at least," he doggedly added, smiling as he watched JC nod in agreement, as he felt JC's soft, silky hair brushing over the skin of his chest, and then desperately breathed, "I -- oh god," as JC traced the lower edge of his rib cage, then leaned in to kiss Justin's stomach, following the lines of his abdominal muscles with his tongue. Justin squirmed in delight, and when JC lifted his head, he was flushed, worrying his lower lip with his teeth.

"Hm," JC said quietly, studying him for a moment. "Take your shirt off," he finally said, and Justin quickly sat up and did it, trembling a little in pride and excitement as he watched JC

watch him.

JC kissed him hard for a few seconds before putting hands on his shoulders and starting to ease him backward, to encourage him to lie on his back. Justin began to breathe raggedly when JC opened his pants and eased off his underwear, and then made a soft, delighted sound when JC put hands on his knees and slowly drew them apart.

"Fuck," JC breathed. "Justin you just -- you're just --"

"You too," Justin whispered as JC settled between his legs, and Justin moaned softly, his cock hot and swollen against JC's. They groaned together as their bodies met, and then JC used slow, rolling motions of the hips to bring them together again and again: delicious friction, delicious jerky movements, and Justin tilted his head back, lifted his chin and swore in delight.

"JC," Justin gasped a little later as JC began to slowly wriggle a slick finger inside him. Justin felt so tight, so needy, and he could hardly allow himself to think about what it would be like to have JC inside him for fear of coming right then and there. He settled instead for urgently rocking his hips against JC's hand, moaning as JC slid first one and then two fingers in and out of him, carefully searching. When he found what he was looking for, Justin cried out hoarsely, brought hips off the bed and shuddered, and for a moment he felt so raw and so sensitive that he almost needed to get away from JC, from the pleasure, but JC used his free hand to hold him down while he moved fingers again and again, stretching and caressing and smiling down at Justin as he breathed raggedly. Again and again, Justin arched, and then yet again as JC perfected his rhythm and the movements of his fingers, until finally he let out a long, low groan, let his legs slide wider apart than ever, and begged, "Now, JC. Oh, please. Now."

JC pressed him firmly to the bed and gripped his hips, his fingers trembling, and then slowly and tenderly leaned forward, covering Justin's body with his own, his mouth hot and hungry against Justin's.

When JC positioned himself between Justin's legs, Justin knew then that it wasn't going to take long, that this was probably going to be the fastest fuck in history, which was a shame, but oh god, JC was moving and JC was so hot and so far inside of him -- JC had slid in so deep -- and it just, it just . . .

Justin's groan was wrenching and desperate, and JC smiled down at him, reached out to soothe him as he strained upward, his hands gentle on Justin's chest, his voice low and tender as he brought Justin over, his cock still swollen and tight inside of him. Once he could think again, Justin gripped JC's hips and urged him onward, his voice growing higher and higher as he watched JC start to lose it, felt his hands tighten around his arms, felt the ragged, frenzied rhythm of his thrusts slow into a single, trembling arch and heard him groan as if he were lost.

"I--" Justin whispered when JC had finished kissing and stroking him. "I just -- god, JC."

JC smiled, then slowly moved aside as Justin got up. "I'll be right back," Justin reassured him, then headed into the bathroom, his legs and arms still trembling a bit in pleasure. He

flipped on the light and stared at himself in the mirror. He was flushed; his mouth was swollen; his eyes were dark and satisfied. He looked debauched -- he was debauched. He could hardly wait to go back for more.

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JC groaned and carefully rolled to the edge of the bed at 6:30. Justin lay very still in the dark and watched him, the curve of his back as he sat for a moment, then the long, graceful lines of his body as he slowly headed for the bathroom. He was walking a little gingerly and Justin smiled in sympathy as he watched. He closed his eyes again and listened for the flush of the toilet, and then the sound of JC's feet in the hallway, listened to him step on all the creaky boards because he didn't know where they were and then listened more carefully still as he came into the bedroom again. For a few moments he stood motionless, and Justin had to work very hard to keep his eyes shut and his breathing regular, because his heart was pounding hard against his chest. If JC got dressed and left -- if JC cut out without a word . . .

It would be, quite frankly, unforgivable given what they'd done last night, given the words they had whispered in the darkness at 3 a.m., and Justin maybe couldn't speak with perfect confidence for JC, but, god help him, he'd certainly meant what he'd said. At the time JC's eyes had been soft and his voice and hands had been sweet and gentle, but maybe -- maybe it hadn't meant the same thing to him. Maybe Justin had called this wrong; maybe JC had called it wrong; maybe this was going to be just another night without follow-up.

"I know you're awake so you might as well just open your eyes," JC finally said, and Justin groaned and lifted his head to meet JC's sharp, inquisitive gaze.

"How did you know I was awake?"

"I was next to you in this bed all night," JC said. "I know what you look like when you're sleeping."

"You watched me sleep?"

"For a while. I mean --" JC ducked his head and sighed, embarrassed, and Justin held back a smile. "What's up?"

"Why are you up? Are you leaving?" Justin quietly asked, and then it was his turn to duck his head, because even to his own ears he sounded pathetic.

JC was quiet for a good long moment. "Well, I don't know," he finally said, his voice flat and almost toneless. "Are you asking me to?"

"The thing is, I don't want you to," Justin murmured in a low voice. "I really don't want you to."

There was a pause and then the bed dipped as JC got into the bed with him, and then Justin sighed in contentment as JC pressed into him from behind, as JC's chin dug into his shoulder and his arm slid around Justin's chest.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to go," JC said quietly. "And I don't know where this is coming from, because we said, Justin, we talked last night about what this meant, and --"

"I know, I know," Justin said, sliding a hand over top of JC's and lacing their fingers together. "I'm sorry. I just -- I guess -- I guess I want this to work, JC. I want it a lot."

"So do I, okay?" JC whispered, and then yawned and kissed the nape of Justin's neck. "And I'm not leaving, and you're not leaving, and we're both -- we're gonna sleep until I wake you up and flip you on your back again."

Justin laughed. "Not if I do it first."

"That's good too," JC sleepily said, and smiled.

"Yeah," Justin murmured, and then closed his eyes and relaxed.

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Eleven in the morning and JC was on his couch, wearing some of Justin's old sweat pants and an even older tee shirt. He was only half-awake, his hair was rumpled, and he desperately needed to shave -- but he somehow still managed to look gorgeous, Justin thought in amazement.

"Here," he said and handed JC a cup of coffee, then laughed out loud when JC looked dubiously at it, then sniffed it.

"For fuck's sake, JC, it's fine. It's good coffee."

JC shook his head. "Sorry, sorry. It's just -- I have my own special blend and --"

"Yes, yes, I'm quite sure you do. But this is good coffee," Justin said stubbornly, then added, "though you probably don't even deserve it being such a snob and all."

"Snob?" JC said in a dangerous, light tone.

Justin laughed. "If the shoe fits . . . the Italian shoe, that is."

JC rolled his eyes. "Can't you think of anything better to do than try to taunt me?" he softly asked, and the interest in his voice was so sexy Justin almost forgot how to speak.

"I, uh. I might, I --"

"Then come here," JC insisted, his eyes starting to darken a bit, but just as Justin had started to sit on the couch next to JC and take him in his arms, the phone rang. Justin froze a moment, trying to figure out who it could be, and JC looked at him, waiting.

"I don't think I'm gonna get that," Justin finally said, and then did move to the couch, sliding an arm around JC and leaning in to kiss him on the cheek.

"Are you sure?" JC's hands were already on Justin's waist, fingers eagerly gathering the hem of his shirt so he could touch bare skin, but he looked a little uncertain.

"God, yes," Justin breathed, and then JC kissed him, and it felt so good; it was so utterly hot and right, and Justin breathed deep and looked speculatively down the length of the couch. He and JC would fit perfectly on it.

His train of thought was interrupted as the answering machine played -- it was Joey. Justin looked up in surprise, waiting, and felt JC go still and alert next to him.

"Justin, hey!" Joey said cheerfully. "Look, man -- I hate to bring up the hellhole we know to be Phoenix Press on a weekend, but motherfucking Chasez has got me backed into a corner and I --"

Justin immediately drew away from JC and lunged as quickly as he could to the phone, managing to pick up the receiver just as Joey was saying "really need your help, okay? So if you --"

"Joey!" Justin exhaled, and turned completely away from JC, whose eyes had gone hard and crystalline and who was looking both curious and savage. "I -- thanks for calling, but this is -- it's really not a good time."

"Oh my god. Don't tell me you actually finally scored?" Joey said in amusement, and Justin laughed weakly.

"Stranger things have happened," he got out.

"Okay, so I'll let you get back to this mystery person, but you have to call me back, okay? Chasez ripped me a new one on the five year plan, is asking for a wholesale revision, and I could really use some help on it."

"But I thought -- " I thought JC told you not to consult with me on it, Justin started to say, then caught himself. "Whatever. Yeah, Joe, I'll call you. Absolutely."

"All right then," Joey said. "You're a good friend, Justin -- I really appreciate it."

"No problem," Justin said and then hung up. For a moment he contemplated trying to act as if nothing had happened, but when he turned around and saw the expression on JC's face, he realized that that probably wasn't going to work.

"Joey sometimes says things without thinking," Justin nervously began.

JC's mouth curved with contempt. "Sometimes?" he lightly asked, and suddenly he looked as remote and unwelcoming as he had on the first day Justin had seen him at the press.

"JC, you can't really mean that," Justin quickly said, and moved back to the couch even though he felt uncertain and awkward.

JC sighed. "Okay, so know what? In some ways, it's good that this happened, because I've got a feeling we might be in this spot again. So we should probably just come to some sort of

agreement about Joey. About work in general."

"Yeah." Justin looked at his feet.

"I'm not sure I can be with you and not talk about work at all," JC slowly went on. "But I am pretty sure that if we don't agree not to talk about Joey, then we're going to have a hard time."

"JC -- if you could just, I don't know, wipe the slate clean with him, look at him through new eyes, I'll bet this whole thing --"

"Justin." JC's voice was quiet but his tone was unmistakable, and Justin snapped his mouth shut. "We don't talk about Joey, okay? We just don't."

"That's not going to be easy for me given that I work with him every damn day," Justin said rather grumpily.

"If we're going to continue this, that's how it has to be," JC said flatly, then reached out and took Justin's hand. "And think carefully about this, because if you let him ruin my chances with you, I'm going to hate him even more."

"JC!" Justin said, shocked, then caught the look of amusement on JC's face. "You don't mean it," he said in relief.

JC shrugged. "Probably not. So, can we agree to that? He's not a topic of conversation for us?"

"All right, but I still -- I just don't think it's going to be that easy."

"That's probably true, but we can try." JC squeezed Justin's fingers. "I think it's very much worth it."

"Yeah," Justin said, then breathed a little bit more quickly as JC brought his hand to his mouth, lightly kissing his knuckles. It was a simple touch, but his body responded to it eagerly, and he was so close to trembling, so very, very close to --

"We should probably also talk about work," JC said.

"Uh, yeah," Justin said, gently disentangling his hand from JC and trying to clear his mind. "I guess it's pretty obvious, right? We don't do or say anything there, don't let anyone know."

"Exactly," JC said. "And also, Justin -- we're going to disagree at work; we're going to get in arguments, we're going to have differences of opinion, we're maybe even going to end up yelling at each other sometimes. What we have to do with that is keep it in the office, all right? We can't let it affect what goes on between us outside."

"JC, again, it's not always that simple."

"I know," JC said. "But Justin, again, we have to try, all right? I want this too much not to give it the best possible chance we can."

"I want it, too," Justin said, immediately charmed. "So much, JC."

"Yeah." JC grinned at him, then looked serious. "So those are the ground rules. We stick to them or this just doesn't happen, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Justin said. "I can live with that."

"Good, then." JC reached for Justin's hand again, looked cannily at him. "So this is a nice big couch."

"Yeah," Justin thickly said. "It is."

JC moved forward, touched lips to Justin's, and then breathed, "Can we stretch out on it, do you think?"

Justin shivered. "I know we can. This couch has seen a lot --"

"I don't want to hear about that." Already JC was kissing the side of Justin's neck, moving a hand to the center of his chest, carefully inching forward, starting to ease him backward. "I want to see how it works right now."

"Okay," Justin gasped, then moaned softly as JC's hands slid under his shirt and dragged him down to the couch with him.

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Devoted though he was to his job, Justin didn't usually make this early an appearance on Monday mornings. But despite a weekend of serious sleep deprivation, he'd woken before dawn and had been unable to go back to sleep.

It was still dark and silent in the hallways as he headed to his office but he'd left his window blinds open and early morning sunlight was streaming into his office. He set his coffee and his briefcase down on the desk and eased into his chair, turning so it faced the window. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes, feeling the warmth seep into him.

Justin reached behind the headrest of his chair and tensed, arching his back and pointing his toes as he pulled his muscles tight and stretched hard. There was some stiffness in his upper thighs, his groin, his abdomen, but he didn't care. He felt almost unbelievably good -- languid and relaxed and completely at peace with the world. Even the nightmare manuscript laying front and center on his desk couldn't wipe the goofy smile off his face.

He finished stretching with a grunt and swiveled back to face his desk, regarding the manuscript without enthusiasm. It was still early, too early for the rest of the press to be cranking up, but he would bet that JC was already on site and well into his work day. Justin nibbled thoughtfully on a thumbnail. Yes, JC would already be hard at work, clear-eyed and freshly shaven and clean-smelling, probably wearing one of those sinfully elegant Italian suits, his hair curling down to his starched collar . . .

. . . and much different from the JC he'd spent twenty minutes saying goodnight to at the door of his apartment late the previous night. That JC had been deliciously rumpled in evening

clothes that had been in a heap on Justin's bedroom floor for almost twenty-four hours. His eyes had been half-closed and slightly bloodshot from lack of sleep and he had a jaw full of scratchy stubble that Justin had been unable to resist touching. And his mouth had been warm and firm on Justin’s, his hands stroking up and down his back, and he’d kissed him insensible.

Justin sighed at the memory and for a moment the urge to go find JC right now was so overpowering that he was actually on his feet and moving toward the doorway of his office before he realized what he was doing. He stopped and considered it, pictured himself leaving his own office and walking down the dark hallway to the spiral staircase that led up to the executive floor, stepping quietly past the silent offices and cubicles to JC's open office door. He thought about watching JC work, of quietly entering his office and standing behind him as he sat at his desk. He thought about sliding his hands through that silky, curling hair, thought about the warm smile he knew JC would have for him, thought about leaning down to kiss the soft mouth that he knew would be tilted toward him, inviting Justin to come closer . . .

Justin’s breath was coming a little shorter and he might have done it, might have marched upstairs and sought JC out for an impossibly inappropriate make-out session right there in JC’s big corner office. This despite their agreement made just the previous morning that keeping their new relationship quiet from the rest of the press was the good, smart thing to do. Thank god his cell phone chimed shrilly from the depths of his briefcase, startling him out of his daydream and away from temptation. He dug it out and flipped it open with a sigh.

"Hey," he said, and smiled at the silence that greeted him.

"Justin?" Lance’s voice was cautious, disbelieving. "I can’t believe -- what are you doing awake at this hour?"

"Dude," he returned, sinking back into his chair and shifting until he got comfortable. "What are you doing calling me at this hour?"

"I was just going to leave a message," Lance informed him. "It never occurred to me you’d be awake and coherent."

"Not only awake and coherent," Justin said wryly, "but showered, dressed and in my office, ready to start my Monday. Aren’t you proud of me?"

Lance laughed. "Not proud, exactly, but I’m sort of impressed. I got your message on Saturday night but you didn’t answer your phone yesterday. I was getting a little concerned."

"Isn’t that sweet," Justin murmured, and grinned as Lance snorted.

"So, did you end up going out?" Lance asked politely, and in the background Justin could hear Lance’s computer beep, and his printer hum. Lance had always been an early riser.

"I did," he said. "In fact, I went to that club -- the one you told me about last week, remember?"

"Oh that one," Lance said with interest. "How was it?"

"It was good," Justin said with admirable nonchalance. "Just like you said, very nice, kind of upscale. The people were interesting."

"The people were rich," Lance said bluntly, and Justin laughed.

"Yeah, man, and the drink prices were incredibly painful. But it was worth it."

"Worth it?" Lance was starting to grin, Justin could tell. "You want to elaborate on that?"

"Not really," Justin said serenely.

"Oh come on," Lance said. "You brought it up, man."

"Nothing really to tell," Justin said, taking a sip of his coffee. "I just felt like going out, and I did, and it was good. So, you know, thanks. For telling me about that place."

"Well, I wish I'd gotten your message," Lance said. "I'm sorry you were by yourself."

"It's okay," Justin said, and oh, this was going to be too easy. "I wasn't by myself for too long."

"Oh, Justin, for heaven's sake," Lance said with considerable exasperation. "Obviously you're dying to tell me, and since I want to know almost as bad as you want to tell me, just spill it already. Christ." He paused, and Justin stifled a laugh as he listened to Lance breathe. "Okay, so, what? Did you find another multimillionaire CEO to take you home? Someone to make you forget about your asshole boss?"

"Noooo," Justin said slowly, and here came the tricky part. "Actually I found something better."

"Better? How?"

"Well, actually it was me taking someone else home. And, well. It was my asshole boss."

There was silence as Lance digested this, and then he started laughing helplessly. Justin rubbed his forehead and waited for Lance to get control of himself. He couldn't wipe the silly smile off his face.

"You're kidding, right? I mean, c'mon, man."

"No, no. Not kidding," Justin said. "Not kidding at all."

"Good lord. What is it with you and that guy?" Lance asked incredulously. "I mean, what the hell, Justin? It's starting to sound like a bad gay Lifetime movie or something."

"Well, you're not wrong about that," Justin said, smiling weakly. "And you know what? You're going to have to stop referring to him as 'that asshole,' Lance, because . . . Well, we've sort of stepped it up from occasional one-night-stand status."

"Stepped it up," Lance repeated slowly.

"Yeah."

"So, what you're saying is . . ."

"Yeah," Justin said. "Pretty much." The goofy grin was back.

Lance was silent for a long moment. "Justin," he said, and Justin could hear the grin in his voice. "Are you telling me that JC Chasez is your *boyfriend*?"

"You know I hate that term," Justin said with some energy. "You know that term drives me crazy. No, I'm not telling you that. I hate that term."

"Oh, so he's not your boyfriend. And you're not his."

Justin squeezed his eyes shut. "Well, no. I'm not really saying that either."

"Jesus Christ. What are you saying?"

"Nothing! Just, you know, stop calling him an asshole. Because he's really not."

"And because he's your boyfriend," Lance teased, and Justin swore at him. Quietly, since people were starting to arrive in the office and the lights in the hallways had come on.

"All right, time for me to work," Justin said sternly.

"Okay, okay," Lance said, still grinning. "We still on for lunch today?"

Justin's eyes slid to his calendar. Lance's name was penciled neatly in the corner under today's date, but to be honest, he really wasn't ready for the sort of grilling he knew Lance would hand him. He didn't want to talk about JC just yet, he realized slowly. He wanted to see and talk to JC.

"Can we reschedule?" Justin asked. "Anytime later this week?"

"Hmm, sounds like you have a better offer already," Lance said, amused. "Sure, how about Thursday?"

"Thursday works perfectly," Justin said, and keyed his cell phone off over the sound of Lance's laughter.

He sat back in his chair and chewed on a lip for a minute. If JC really was his boyfriend, albeit something of a secret one, it should be easy to call him up and propose lunch. Likewise, if JC was his boss, it should also be easy to propose a lunch meeting, to go over something work related. His eyes slid to the phone, then to his computer. Easy. Justin could just call him up. Or shoot him an e-mail.

But he had no idea what sort of schedule JC had going today. All Justin knew was that JC had sighed with a deep and sincere regret when he'd said last night that he really should go home and sleep in his own bed, and it had taken him a very, very long time to actually get himself out the door. Not that Justin had exactly been encouraging him to leave, he thought wryly.

Quite the opposite. But the point was, JC had felt like he needed an undisturbed night's rest, which meant he probably had a very, very full day today.

So, on one hand it was quite possible that if Justin called JC up and invited him to lunch, JC might turn him down. Because he was busy, or perhaps because he intended to be very strict about the work secrecy thing. Justin sighed, deeply.

But on the other hand, maybe JC would like it if Justin took the initiative and invited him to lunch. He tapped his pen thoughtfully on the first page of the manuscript, eyes unfocused. JC was a power mogul and a control freak, but he'd certainly been appreciative when Justin took charge in other ways . . .

That was a dangerous train of thought, and with a sigh Justin turned his attention to the manuscript from hell and settled in to work. As hard as it was, it would be best to wait and see what JC did first. He'd at least give him a couple of hours to make some sort of move.

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At 10:35 Justin got up from his desk, stretched until his back cracked, and headed down the hallway toward the kitchen for a soda. As he'd feared, the manuscript was a mess; he was dreading the telephone call he'd have to have with the author this afternoon if the chapters he was about to tackle didn't improve significantly. The manuscript bore little resemblance to the author's original description, Justin thought with a frown as he turned the corner and swung down the hall, and he'd hate to think that this author had been lying to him about it.

"Justin!" The voice belonged to Mark, JC's assistant, and Justin paused as he hurried up to him. "Do you have a few minutes? JC's in a meeting with some of the art department about the Hayes biography; Chris says there's a problem with the permissions on some of the photographs, and he sent me to find you . . ."

Justin was already reversing direction, his heart thudding irregularly at the sound of JC's name. So it was going to be like this, he thought ruefully. The last time he'd seen and talked to JC he'd been fresh from Justin's bed, and they'd stood at his door and made out like they weren't going to see each other again for a month before he'd left. And now Justin had to face him before a roomful of people, and not let on that he'd spent the better part of his morning struggling against the urge to leave his desk and hunt JC down wherever he was in the press. Find him, drag him into a dark corner, and kiss and touch him until JC was as desperate and deprived as Justin himself had felt all morning. He pulled in a deep breath and commanded his heart to stop racing as they approached the main conference room.

"Found him!" Mark said brightly as they entered, and Justin threw a general smile out, eyes skimming quickly over the people in the room as they greeted him. Chris, his hair going every which way but neatly dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt for once, two of his assistants -- one of them with a smear of ink on her cheek -- a project editor from manuscript editorial . . . and JC, who looked at Justin with clear, sharp eyes over a carefully impersonal smile. Justin gulped as he took a seat at the table and leaned forward, focusing on the photographs under discussion and trying very, very hard not to look at JC.

It wasn’t a long meeting. The photos on the table were ones Justin was almost certain he’d obtained full permission on; unless he was mistaken they were from the author’s own collection. He believed that he had copies of the necessary documents in his file. If not, he told Chris earnestly, he could get permissions, or at least photographs nearly identical to the ones under discussion.

"Soon?" Chris asked, raising his eyebrows. He was very, very serious, and Justin nodded emphatically.

"Oh yeah. Today, even," he promised firmly, and Chris nodded, satisfied.

There followed some confusing conversation among the art people about plates and image placement, and Justin sat back in his chair, outwardly attentive but with his stomach curling with excitement and anticipation. JC was silent at the head of the long conference table and there were two people sitting between him and Justin; nevertheless Justin could feel JC’s eyes on him periodically, sliding across his face like a caress. Under the table, Justin’s leg jittered with tension, and he jumped a little at the sound of JC’s voice.

"Okay, so we’re done here? Chris? You have everything you need?" His voice was smooth and so businesslike that it made Justin blink -- perhaps JC wasn’t feeling anything like the turmoil he himself was feeling, perhaps he really was able to shut it all off and become a completely cold and unfeeling person, just as Justin had suspected on more than one occasion. Before the last weekend, of course, but still . . .

There was a flurry as everyone rose to their feet and various people started to scrape up the photos spread out on the table. "Leave these three here for a minute, will you?" JC said smoothly. "Justin, if you have some time right now?"

Justin nodded, not trusting himself to speak as the rest of the people shuffled out the conference room door. JC remained seated and Justin did too, his eyes turned determinedly to the three photos spread out in front of him. The doors closed. Silence.

JC’s chair squeaked as he swiveled it toward Justin, and Justin looked sideways at him. JC’s back was to the glass window and there was a small smile playing across his full lips. His eyes were warm and appreciative, and Justin felt himself start to smile in response. "So," he said quietly. "You wanted to talk some more about these photographs?"

"Not at all," JC said slowly, his voice low and a little husky. "I just wanted to say good morning to you, and I wanted to do it without an audience."

Elation spread through Justin, warm and thick, making his heart stutter. "Well," he said, his voice just as quiet. "Good morning, JC."

"Good morning, Justin." JC’s smile widened, warm and intimate. Behind his head Justin saw Mark peer curiously in at the two of them, and he hastily wiped the smile from his face. Leaning forward, he picked up the closest photograph and held it up a little, turning to JC with a serious expression.

"If I weren't facing that window," Justin said earnestly, "I would come over there and show you exactly how good of a morning I think it really is."

JC's smile grew sharp and predatory. He sat forward and angled his chair away from the door. "Would you, now," he murmured. He tilted his head so it would appear that he was closely studying the photograph Justin held, but his eyes were bright and hungry on Justin's face. "Is that a threat? Or a promise?"

Justin felt himself start to tremble, his skin breaking out in goose bumps. He laughed a little and ducked his head to hide his expression from any interested eyes. He set aside the photograph and slid the next one over to JC, standing up and pointing at it. "Neither," he admitted ruefully. "It's more of a selfish sort of wish-fulfillment than a threat." He couldn't suppress the smile spreading over his face as he glanced at JC, whose answering grin was a thing of breathtaking sexiness.

"Is there anything more you and I could possibly discuss about these photographs?" JC asked quietly, his eyes hot.

"Damned if I can think of a single, solitary thing," Justin said wryly. His voice was breathless and his hands were trembling. He set the photograph down before it started to shake.

"I guess we should get out of here, then."

"Yeah. Yeah, we should." He could not pull his eyes away from JC's face and JC was staring back at him, the smile dropping from his face.

"Have lunch with me today." JC murmured. His voice was rough.

"Fuck, yes," Justin said hoarsely. "The sooner the better, okay?"

"Okay," JC said quietly. He stood also and watched as Justin gathered the photographs together. "I'll meet you in the lobby at, what, 12:30?" He watched as Justin nodded, jerkily. "Bring a briefcase or a folder or something," he said, and licked his lips. Justin stared until JC raised his eyebrows.

"Are you taking those back down to the art department?" he asked. Justin nodded dumbly. "I'll walk with you. Tell me about whatever you worked on this morning on the way."

Justin's legs felt trembly and unstable, but they seemed to support him as he tucked the photographs under his arm and preceded JC out the conference room door. Unbelievably, life at the press seemed to be proceeding as normal. People moved in and out of cubicles, had conversations with each other and on the telephone, and didn't spare either of them a second glance.

Justin couldn't believe it. The blood was pounding through his head and he couldn't seem to draw enough oxygen or regulate his breathing. He hoped fervently that his face wasn't beet red.

They began walking down the long main hallway, JC at Justin's right. Justin began to speak quietly in jerky, uncoordinated sentences about his puzzlement over the differences between what the author had described to him the previous month and the actual manuscript he'd been reviewing. He glanced at JC as they turned a corner just in time to see him frown thoughtfully, glance behind them, and then reach out and take Justin's arm, pulling him quickly into a silent and empty office. His head spun as JC placed his hands firmly on Justin's waist and yanked their bodies together a split second before his mouth covered Justin's, still hanging half-open in surprise.

It was fast and greedy and wet, JC's lips hot and demanding on Justin's mouth, his tongue immediately sliding inside and making Justin shudder. He tossed the photographs in his hand blindly onto the empty chair beside them and wrapped his arms around JC's hips, digging his fingers into his ass and pulling him closer, sliding their bodies together. They both moaned.

JC pulled back, his mouth wet and his eyes wild. "To take the edge off," he whispered, and grinned when Justin half groaned, half laughed. JC's hands bracketed Justin's face and he leaned in to kiss him once more, hard, and then again, slow and gentle and almost chastely. He smoothed his fingertips once over Justin's eyebrows and then released him, stepping back to look carefully out the doorway up and down the quiet hallway. Then he slid silently out of the office and walked up the hall without a backward glance.

Justin slumped against the wall and took another thirty seconds to compose himself, then gathered the photographs and continued unsteadily down the hall to the art department. It was a wonderful day, the first in what was sure to be a great week, and he found himself smiling brightly at people for no reason whatsoever as he walked. Lunch was less than two hours away.

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A warm and inviting glow from the just-risen sun drifted through his living room blinds as Justin shuffled out of his bedroom, yawning and scratching. He wavered a moment, struggling with the urge to collapse on his couch and stare blearily out the window. But it was Monday again, and he had to go to work today, so he resisted the couch and instead opened his apartment's front door. The morning newspaper was waiting for him and he grabbed it, tossing it on the breakfast bar before pouring his morning cereal and easing himself on to a stool.

He crunched methodically, scanning the world news and sports sections before giving in to temptation and easing the society and gossip pages out from the center of the pile. He couldn't help it; it was embarrassing but he continued to be fascinated by the glittering world JC inhabited, and the newspaper could usually be relied upon to give him a glimpse of it.

It had been a dizzying few weeks. Dealing with JC at the office had never been easy; now that they were on this fragile and exciting new footing it was close to impossible. Justin had never been the sort of person to hide what he was thinking and feeling, and now that he was so happy, doing so required a huge effort. He found it so difficult to keep from grinning at JC when they chanced to meet in the halls, and to keep from his eyes from lingering on him in meetings. The challenge to stay calm and present a business-as-usual facade battled with the elation he felt inside every time JC's eyes slid over him, every time JC gave him a small,

secret smile that said he was thinking things that had no place in a business office. These things kept Justin at a constant fever pitch of excitement.

And it didn't help that JC was so incredibly busy and that they didn't have nearly as much time together -- private or otherwise -- as Justin would've liked. Apparently August was a big month for Antaeus, and between juggling press business and participating in a dismaying number of corporate meetings and events, JC was busy and preoccupied all the time. Justin tried to be patient -- if nothing else he knew that JC wanted them to be together just as badly as Justin did, and since Justin's need was substantial the last few weeks had given him an even healthier respect for JC's ability to focus when it came to his work.

They'd learned some things in the two weeks since meeting at the club. One was that lunch during the week was very tough to pull off. Being out of the press gave them both a false sense of privacy that had been shattered the first time they tried it, when the little, out of the way restaurant JC had chosen had been unexpectedly occupied by a number of co-workers from Phoenix. "We should've just gone to your place," JC had muttered as they were seated, and Justin had sighed in agreement as he pulled out some folders and pretended to discuss them. It seemed that having lunch together, at least anywhere close to the press, was not such a great idea.

Dinner had seemed a much better plan, but the evenings that JC could get away early enough to have dinner at any sort of a reasonable hour were rare. They'd tried once, scheduling a late dinner at a small restaurant at the end of a very long work day. They'd talked a little, stared a lot, and rushed through their meal before going back to Justin's apartment and tumbling directly into bed.

And that had been excellent in every way except for the fact that there was little to no sleep, and they'd both been heavy-eyed and sluggish the next day. The second time they'd had dinner on a week night JC had said, with more than a little regret, that he didn't dare go home with Justin. "There's a meeting in the morning," he'd said, his eyes dark. "And I have to be able to think during it, and. God. I want to, but I just can't. I'm so sorry." He'd looked so upset, so frustrated and bitter that Justin had swallowed his own protests and sighed. He needed to catch on sleep too, he'd assured JC. They'd have quality time on the weekend, and as they said good night on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, it was clear to Justin that JC was looking forward to it every bit as much as he was.

And that weekend had been wonderful, but this last weekend had made even more demands on JC's time. He'd had some sort of company function to deal with on Saturday, and he hadn't shown up to the park for their planned Sunday morning jog. He'd left a message for Justin apologizing and offering to make it up to him in any way Justin chose -- the sort of offer Justin always, always appreciated, especially when issued in that particular tone of voice. Justin had seriously considered canceling the lunch plans he'd made with Lance as well as the pick-up basketball game in the afternoon that he'd committed to, but had tried to keep himself in check. JC didn't need to know exactly how eager for him Justin was. He already knew far, far too much.

But then JC had had some sort of dinner with his family on Sunday evening and as a result Justin hadn't seen him since their late dinner on Friday -- a dinner that had been followed by

a DVD in Justin's living room that they'd both missed because they'd been making out on the couch, and when JC had left shortly after dawn on Saturday morning neither of them had slept more than a couple of hours. The memory made Justin smile contentedly.

But the weekend that had followed had been rather long -- full of activity though it had been. It seemed odd, already, to have gone two whole days without seeing JC, and Justin made a face at his own sentimentality as he scooped up another spoonful of cereal, his eyes busily scanning the front page of the society section.

And look at that, he thought with some surprise. Pay dirt, right here on the first page.

The photograph was in color and took up a full quarter of the bottom of the page, with smaller photos beside it. JC was on the left, looking very at ease amid a group of distinguished people, all in formal dress and in what looked like very high-class surroundings. Justin's eyes skimmed over the photo, lingering on JC's face, the curling hair, the luminous blue eyes, the small smile playing on the full lips. Justin sighed. He was so hot.

He dragged his eyes away from the main picture and examined the smaller ones. One of JC and a woman he now knew was his mother, a small one of JC's grandfather, one of a large and elaborate cake . . .

Justin's brow creased. A cake? He blinked and examined the caption. New York Society celebrates the 28th birthday of Antaeus Corp. VP JC Chasez with a glittering reception hosted by . . . Justin stopped reading and sat back, his cereal forgotten. JC had told him that Saturday night was some sort of tedious company function; Justin had sympathized, assuming he meant board meetings and overseas teleconferences and, well, tedium. His eyes scanned over the photos again, the smiling people in formal dress, the champagne glasses, the live band, the cake, JC's small smile.

Justin slowly pushed the paper away and hunched over his cereal. His heart was thudding painfully in his chest and he had to swallow hard to get past the tightness in his throat. It was a birthday celebration; JC had had a birthday, and a big glittering affair to celebrate it, and he'd lied about both things to Justin. Well, not really lied, Justin thought, he hadn't really out and out lied. He'd just kept the truth from Justin by not telling him the exact nature of the function. Justin spooned up the last of his cereal and turned his back on the newspaper, going to the sink to rinse his bowl.

The little ball of hurt in his chest didn't subside as he showered and prepared to leave for work, despite the stern talking-to he gave himself. JC hadn't told Justin that it was his birthday. There had been a big party, and JC hadn't included Justin or mentioned it in any way, but why should he? They'd only been seeing each other -- really seeing each other -- for a few weeks. Maybe it hadn't occurred to JC that Justin would want to be part of a celebration for his birthday, would be interested in meeting his family. Hell, to be honest such a thing hadn't even occurred to Justin until just this moment.

And Justin really didn't know anything about JC's family. Maybe they didn't even know that JC dated men, much less that he was dating anyone specific.

Justin's fingers froze as they closed around his keys and he hesitated in the doorway of his apartment, frowning as another thought occurred to him. Justin certainly wasn't dating anyone but JC; he had no interest in or desire to do so, and he'd just assumed that JC felt the same way. It wasn't something that had come up in conversation, but it was possible -- and this thought made him take a long deep breath as the knot in his throat tightened -- it was possible that JC didn't think of their relationship in the same way.

Justin scowled hard as the ache in his chest grew, and under the hurt he felt more than a little alarm. How had this happened so fast? How had he allowed JC to get close enough to hurt him like this?

He closed and locked his apartment door and left his building, greeting a neighbor absently, still deep in thought. It was earlier than he usually left for work, but it was a beautiful morning and still cool from the night before. He would use the extra time to walk to work and clear his head.

But his forehead was still creased in thought when he arrived at the press, just beginning to bustle on this Monday morning. He nodded and smiled at co-workers on his way to his office, and felt like his face would crack. It was a relief to shut his office door behind him, and he dropped his messenger bag to the floor and settled himself behind his desk. Time to work, he thought, and sternly resisted the urge to find a reason to go up to the executive floor. He needed a little time before he saw JC again.

But it appeared that he wasn't going to get it. His heart jumped at the sharp rap on his closed door, and it opened before he was able to answer. JC leaned into the doorway, his face stern and business-like, but his eyes warm as they settled on Justin.

"I'm sorry to hit you with this first thing in the morning," JC said seriously as Justin blinked at him, his senses scrambling. "I have a conference call with Blaney Distribution in a few minutes and a question came up about the Hayes book -- if you have a couple of minutes?"

Justin lunged into action, punching the power button on his computer terminal and finding his voice. "Sure," he said, and cleared his throat when his voice cracked. "If you don't mind waiting just a minute, I should have everything you need right here . . ." He trailed off as he heard the door close with a sharp click, and gulped.

"I knew you would," JC said quietly from much, much closer, and Justin's throat went dry. He risked a glance up and saw JC standing beside his desk, his smile warm and his eyes hot. "Good morning," he added quietly. "I'm really, really glad to see you."

That smile made Justin absolutely melt, and for one desperate moment the urge to stand up and throw himself into JC's arms was almost irresistible. Then he remembered that morning's newspaper and sank back into his chair, settling for a cautious smile. "I'm really glad to see you too," he confessed, his eyes searching JC's face carefully. "How was your weekend?"

JC's eyes didn't waver from his. "It was long," he said bluntly, leaning a hip casually against the plain chair facing Justin's desk. "The last good thing that happened to me," he continued, "happened before dawn on Saturday morning." His voice was low and lazy and unbearably intimate; it made Justin's heart stutter and his breath grow short and that was without the

memory of exactly which event JC was talking about -- the event that had involved Justin waking up while it was still dark outside, overwhelmed by the sensation of JC's warm and naked body beside him, the unbearable softness of the skin over his ribs, the sleek line of his thigh and hip, and Justin's powerful need to touch and taste him everywhere, immediately. He felt himself flush and JC's smile widened imperceptibly.

"And how was yours?" JC questioned him quietly, and Justin gave up, smiling back at him.

"Well, it was okay," he ventured slowly. "But I'd have to say Saturday morning was certainly the highlight," he added, and with an effort he turned from JC's smile to log on to his computer and pull up the files.

"That's so good to know," JC murmured and Justin bit his lower lip to keep from shuddering. God, when was he going to get his physical reaction to this man under control? He felt like a horny teenager almost all of the time -- it was very distracting.

"I saw you in the paper this morning," he blurted out, and wished he'd bitten off his tongue.

"In the paper?" JC repeated blankly and looked puzzled when Justin swiveled back to face him. "The paper. Oh," he said, his brow clearing. "The benefit on Saturday? Yes, I think there was a lot of press there."

Justin watched him carefully. "The paper said it was for your birthday."

JC shrugged a careless shoulder. "It's more of a company thing," he said as Justin turned away to type on his keyboard. "Antaeus's annual meeting is in August every year, and the party is an excuse for a fund raiser so we can write off its cost. My birthday," he said with a wry twist of his mouth, "just happens to be conveniently timed."

Justin stared at him. "Conveniently timed?" he repeated. "So, when is your birthday?" he asked and JC cocked his head a little, considering him.

"It was a couple of weeks ago," he answered, and Justin blinked in astonishment.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, just barely remembering to keep his voice down. "I mean, you never even mentioned it."

JC probably wasn't capable of looking confused and uncomfortable, but the rapid blinking of his eyes gave him away. "I don't know. I just -- it never really occurred to me, I guess," he said slowly, his blue eyes sharp and wide on Justin's face. "We don't make a big production about birthdays in my family. Christmas is important," he added helpfully, "but everyone is scattered all over these days, and since my grandmother passed away, birthday celebrations fell by the wayside. They're just not that big of a deal."

Justin stared at him. "You mean the huge formal gala Saturday night, with a cake and a band and everything -- that wasn't a big production?" he asked incredulously. "It wasn't all about you?"

JC cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully on Justin's face. "No. I told you," he said evenly. "There were almost five hundred people there, many of them corporate executives from overseas. Except for two minutes of cake cutting, it wasn't about me at all. It was about preparation for the annual meeting, it was about a charity fund raiser, it was about rich people dressing up. That's all."

Justin sat back in his chair, his mind spinning. "But you had dinner with your family last night, right? Didn't they . . .?"

JC rolled his eyes a little and Justin shut up. "We don't really do birthdays," he repeated a little impatiently. "Dinner last night was a command performance because an old army buddy of my grandfather's was in town, so there was a small party at my parents' house for him." His eyes were brilliant and sharp on Justin's face. "And maybe I'm missing something here, but I have to say I'm completely baffled by your interest in this subject, Justin."

JC was watching him closely and Justin opened his mouth to answer, although he didn't know yet what he was going to say. He was saved by a sharp rap on his office door, followed immediately by the door opening and Joey's head appearing in the opening.

"Hey, Justin!" Joey said with a big smile. "How was your week . . . " His eyes shifted to JC and his face changed dramatically. "Uh, sorry," he said quickly, already edging back through the doorway.

JC lifted one eyebrow. "Nice to see you here on time," he said quietly, and Joey flushed, his lips tightening.

"Yeah," he said shortly, and glanced back at Justin. "I'll, yeah, I'll talk to you later, Justin." He disappeared and the door shut with a loud click and for a moment there was a thick silence in Justin's office.

"Well, I have that conference call," JC said quietly. He hadn't moved a muscle during Joey's interruption, but was now pushing himself away from the chair, standing and turning to leave.

"But wait," Justin protested, motioning toward his computer screen. "Don't you need . . ."

JC gave him a smile that somehow managed to be sexy and wry at the same time. "I have what I need for the call," he said with a shrug, his blue eyes candid as they met Justin's. "I really just stopped by to say good morning."

Emotions surged through Justin -- desire, longing, a joy that was almost desperate in its fierceness. He found himself lunging to his feet and when JC glanced curiously at him he clenched his fists and blurted out "Saturday."

JC paused, one elegant eyebrow rising. "Saturday?" he repeated politely.

"I want Saturday," Justin said firmly. "I want -- can you clear your Saturday? This Saturday? I want you to spend it with me."

JC stared at him for a moment, his hand on Justin's office doorknob. "What's this about?" he asked.

"It's about your birthday," Justin said. "I want to do something for it." Ideas were already racing through his head, and he frowned when JC started to shake his head, slowly.

"Justin, it's not that I don't appreciate the sentiment," he said quietly, "but I told you we just really don't . . ."

"Well, where I come from," Justin interrupted, "we kind of do."

JC stared at him with fascination and a little amusement and Justin nodded firmly. "Saturday," JC repeated.

"The entire day," Justin added helpfully. "No meetings, no work." He waited, watching JC's forehead crease a little. "Can you do it?"

"Well," JC said slowly. "I think I can manage that, but it'll mean a pretty heavy week this week, what with the corporate meeting and everything." His eyes traveled over Justin's tense stance, the fists balled into the pockets of his pants. "But if it means this much to you . . ." he trailed off.

"Oh, it does," Justin assured him. "Like I said, where I come from we observe the birthdays of the people we, um, care about. Plus," he continued with a rush, "I want to see you. More of you," he said, and felt himself flush as JC smiled at him, slow and warm.

"Well," he murmured. "That sounds like an offer I really can't refuse." And here came the jackpot -- the real grin that made JC's eyes squint and lit up his entire face. Justin stared, entranced, until JC turned away to open the door.

"Thank you," JC said, all business again.

"Thank you," Justin breathed, and then blinked hard and cleared his throat. "I mean, uh, you're welcome," Justin said, and when the door closed quietly behind JC he let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He threw himself back into his chair and let the grin spread over his face, his hurt from the morning forgotten. Then he leaned forward and grabbed his phone, dialing the number from memory. He tapped his fingers impatiently on his desktop as he waited and started talking without waiting for a greeting.

"Lance! Lance I need a favor. Will you loan me your car on Saturday?"

"Justin?" Lance asked slowly. "What is it with you and these early bird mornings all of a sudden?"

Justin rolled his eyes impatiently. "I'm busy and important, man. I have things to do, places to go, people to see, day trips to plan. It's that last item that I need to discuss with you, so pay attention. Your car. Will you let me borrow it?"

"And you've already hit the coffee too, I see," Lance said wryly, and snickered when Justin groaned impatiently. "What do you need my car for?"

"I promise I'll take good care of it," Justin said evasively.

Lance was silent for a long moment and Justin could almost see the wheels turning in his head. He grinned as Lance sighed heavily. "Oh god. What are you up to now, Justin? What have you done? Why do you need my car?"

Justin leaned back in his chair and let his grin widen. "I'm just pulling your leg," he said cheerfully. "The truth is I want to get out of the city for the day." He spun back and forth in his chair. "I have a date."

"You have a date, with your billionaire high-class boyfriend, the one with multiple expensive vehicles and probably a limo and driver at his disposal, and you want to borrow my car?" Lance asked incredulously.

Justin laughed and decided not to object to Lance's terminology. "Yeah, I'm planning something for him, and I want to do it all," he said. "I mean, it would be stupid to ask him out, and to clear his whole day for me, and tell him he has to drive us around."

"I guess," Lance said slowly. "Although I'm sure you'd be a lot more comfortable in one of his cars."

Justin cocked his head, puzzled. "There's nothing wrong with your car," he said.

"No, of course not," Lance replied. "It's just not something a billionaire business tycoon could appreciate, that's all."

Justin smiled. "You know, he's not really like that," he offered, and grimaced at Lance's snort. "Well, okay, he's totally like that, but in most other ways he's completely normal, and you know," he trailed off, his eyes going unfocused for a moment. "He's a good guy. One of these days you'll meet him for real, and you'll see."

"Oh, I will?" Lance asked with some amusement. "You're going to start introducing him to friends and family, Justin? Is that what you're telling me?"

Justin flushed. "Well, yeah. Probably. Eventually. I mean, not right now, but, you know. One of these days."

"Uh huh," Lance said with utter disbelief. "And he's going to take you home to the Chasez palace where his parents will greet you with cries of happiness, right? And start taking you to his big billionaire society galas as his date?"

Justin flushed. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," he muttered, and Lance laughed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, take the car, have a good time. I didn't mean to burst your bubble."

"You totally meant to burst my bubble," Justin accused, but he relaxed just the same.

"So, where are you going?"

Justin tapped his fingers on the top of his desk. It had seemed like a great idea just a few minutes ago; now it seemed stupid and juvenile and completely without class. "I didn't have big plans," he said slowly. "I just thought -- you know, JC works really, really hard, and his birthday was a couple of weeks ago and he didn't even mention it to me because apparently his hoity toity family doesn't do birthdays. So I thought I'd just get him out of the city for the day. Take him to the beach, out to dinner, something casual where he'd be forced to relax."

Lance was silent and Justin felt his cheeks start to heat up. "It's a stupid idea, isn't it. God."

"Actually," Lance said slowly, "that's probably a really good plan. I mean, there's nothing special and expensive that you could do that would actually seem special to him, you know? But I bet he never takes the day off and just hangs out at a beach." Lance paused and Justin could almost hear the grin through the telephone line. "You might score some big points on this one."

"Yeah, yeah," Justin said, rolling his eyes. "Well, that's my only plan so far. I want to take him somewhere where he can relax, and make a little bit of a fuss over him because of his birthday."

"And because you really like him," Lance teased, and Justin rolled his eyes and snorted.

But then Justin paused, remembering the grin JC had given him as he'd left his office a few minutes ago, and felt himself actually begin to blush. "Well, yeah, there's that," he muttered. "Plus there's the fact that his family seems to be a bunch of snobs with sticks up their asses."

"Expensive sticks," Lance said, and they both snickered. "Anyway, for what it's worth, I think you've hit on a good plan," Lance continued. "I need the car on Wednesday but you can come over and take it anytime after that, okay?"

"Thanks, man," Justin said. "I owe you one."

"How about you name your first-born after me," Lance said with a laugh, and hung up on him while Justin was in the process of cursing him out.

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Deeply absorbed in the manuscript, Justin didn't even look up when his phone rang, answering it with an absent "hello" instead of his usual business-like greeting. JC's quiet voice saying his name jolted him back to himself with a surge of adrenaline, and he hurriedly tossed the manuscript on his desk.

"I hope I'm not calling at a bad time," JC said politely, his voice slightly tinny. He must be wearing that cordless headset, Justin thought inanely, and pushed away the image of JC, hard at work at his desk just one floor up.

"No, not at all," he answered, automatically checking his doorway to see if anyone was hovering and dropping his voice. "I'm halfway through a manuscript about the birth of the blues. It's pretty good," he added.

"I’m glad to hear that," JC said. He was smiling, Justin could tell. It made him smile too.

"I’m guessing that’s not what you called about," Justin said.

"You’d be correct," JC answered, and Justin leaned back in his chair, feeling his heart flutter in his chest.

"Well then," he said, dropping his voice even lower and making his tone husky and suggestive. "What can I do for you today?"

JC made a quiet noise somewhere between a laugh and a groan. "Oh, there’s plenty that you could do for me," he said. "And there’s quite a bit I could do for you as well," he added slyly, and Justin felt his face start to burn. He was so out of his league here.

"But what I really called for," JC continued briskly, "is to find out about the plan for Saturday."

"Oh, well. The plan is," Justin said, his eyes watchful on his doorway as people passed down the hall, "for you to be ready for me, first thing in the morning. I’m going to pick you up and take you somewhere, and we’re not coming back until late. And you’re to leave your cell phone at home."

"I can’t believe I’m allowing you to order me around like this," JC said softly, and Justin grinned.

"I can’t believe you’re enjoying it," he countered, just as softly.

"But I’m sure you understand that I need to know what the plan is," JC said, and now his voice was all business. Someone must have come into his office.

"Oh yes, I’m sure I do," Justin said serenely. "But I’m not going to tell you."

"Yes, one moment," JC said tersely.

There was silence, and in the background Justin heard muffled voices and the slide of paper, and then JC’s voice directing someone to shut the door behind him. He waited, twisting his chair back and forth.

"Justin," JC said finally. "I appreciate an element of surprise just as much as the next person, but if we’re going somewhere for an entire day I need to know where we’re going so I can make the appropriate arrangements."

Justin blinked in surprise. "Appropriate arrangements? Like what? Secret service?"

"No, no. But if I know where we’re going," JC said reasonably, "I can call ahead and make plans. Lunch, dinner, whatever."

"Oh no, not this time," Justin said with a smile. "This time you’re just going to have to trust me to take care of you." He waited, listening to the silence on the other end of the phone. "I

mean," he made his voice as seductive as he could, "I don't think I've let you down yet. Have I?"

He was rewarded when JC laughed a little shakily. "No, you certainly have not," JC murmured, and then sighed. "The thing is, I need to know what to wear."

"To wear?" Justin pressed his lips together hard and did his best not to laugh.

"Yes," and now JC sounded the slightest bit defensive. "I can't be appropriately dressed unless I know where we are going."

"Okay, okay," Justin said with amusement. "I'll just tell you, then. Wear a pair of cargo shorts, and a tee shirt. And sandals. And bring a hat and your swim shorts."

"Swim shorts?" JC said alertly. "Are we going to the beach? Because my family has a cabana on . . ."

"JC," Justin said quietly, glancing again at his doorway. "Stop." He waited a moment, eyes watchful on the activity outside his door, then hunched over the telephone receiver and spoke very, very quietly. "You are not making any arrangements. You are not doing anything, but being ready for me when I come for you at 9:00 on Saturday morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course, but I'm just saying . . ."

"JC," Justin all but whispered, and JC fell silent.

"All right," JC murmured, and Justin closed his eyes as his pulse thudded and his toes curled. "Is there anything I can do -- anything at all -- that will persuade you to tell me what you have planned for me?"

Justin felt the smile stretch across his face as sheer joy surged through him. "No," he said softly. "But you're more than welcome to give that a try this evening, if you're so inclined."

"Best offer I've had yet today," JC said softly, and Justin squirmed in his chair. "Unfortunately," he continued, "I have a meeting tonight with some of the board members from western Europe, and a pre-shareholders' meeting tomorrow night."

Justin sighed with disappointment. "Well, then, I guess you'll just have to wait and see what Saturday brings," he said lightly. He was smiling as they said goodbye, and it took him a long time to focus again on the origin of the blues.

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The week had been hot and clear, and Saturday morning dawned with the promise of more of the same. Justin had been up late the night before, cleaning the windows of Lance's car, vacuuming it, and printing maps to the beach he'd, after much research, chosen on Long Island. He'd been to the deli around the corner from his apartment, and had had a long consultation with the owner about wine. The things that needed to be cold were in the cooler, everything else was packed securely in a paper grocery bag. Justin loaded them carefully into

the trunk of Lance's Camry, rubbed his slightly sweating hands against his thighs and checked his watch. 8:30. Time to pick up JC.

Traffic was already heavy as he headed into Manhattan, despite it being a Saturday. Justin glanced obsessively at his watch and told himself that the flutters in his stomach were due to anticipation and not nerves. In fact, he was a little worried. He hadn't spoken with JC since early in the week. Justin knew that JC was excruciatingly busy, and that the corporation's annual meetings had kept him out of the press for much of the week. Except for a torrid exchange of cell phone messages -- the thought of which still made Justin's heart thud irregularly -- they hadn't talked since Monday, and he'd only glimpsed JC across the hall once, on Tuesday morning. It had been, Justin thought with a sigh, a very, very long week.

And he knew that he was partially to blame for JC's unreasonable schedule. Although the bulk of the big meetings were over, Justin had the idea that most of the overseas executives would be in New York through the weekend. It was possible that JC would have had some trouble disentangling himself from his obligations today.

But he hadn't mentioned anything along those lines in his last message, so Justin was going to assume that all systems were go. A frown crossed his face as he made the turn that would take him to JC's building. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that the bulk of the nervous flutters in his stomach were due to his lingering concerns about the upcoming day. JC was a man of expensive tastes, and Justin hoped that the simple plans he'd made wouldn't disappoint him.

It was 9:00 on the nose when Justin drove up slowly to the tall canopied entrance. The doormen looked at him expectantly and a little suspiciously, and Justin hesitated, unsure for a moment whether to pull around the corner to find a place to park or pause at the front doors. He pulled up to the curb and idled, fumbling for his cell phone. He was frowning at the display when he heard a tap on the passenger side window and looked up to see JC, peering curiously in at him.

"Oh," Justin said, his heart lurching a little in appreciation. JC looked like he'd just rolled out of bed, eyes a little puffy, hair stuffed into a black baseball cap that said Mets. Justin found the button that would roll down the window and JC leaned in, bracing his arms on the side of the car and giving him a slow smile. Justin felt his anxiety drift easily away and he grinned back at him.

"Are we going in this car?" JC asked curiously, and Justin blinked.

"Look, I know it's nothing special," he said defensively. "But it's reliable and it'll get us to where we're going, and really there's no reason . . ."

"Justin," JC said low and soft, and Justin shut up, fast. "I only meant that if you want me to get in, you're going to have to unlock the door."

"Oh. Oh!" Justin said, and tore his eyes away from JC's face, searching for the button that would unlock the passenger side door. He tried several, and succeeded in causing the turn signal to go on, the wipers to take a swipe across the windshield, and the sunroof to start to open.

"Or," JC said lazily, "you could just leave me standing here at the curb like a cheap piece of meat." He sounded like he was struggling not to laugh.

"I got it," Justin muttered. "I got it, hold on." He found the right button and the door opened. JC threw a small duffel bag into the back seat and slid smoothly in beside Justin, pulling sunglasses from the visor of his hat and fitting them carefully over his face.

"Good morning," he murmured, a smile flirting across his full lips as he turned to face Justin.

"Oh god, yes," Justin breathed, and leaned in to kiss him. JC's lips were cool and his tongue was warm; he tasted like sweet cereal and minty toothpaste and Justin's eyes closed slowly with pleasure. The skin on JC's neck was smooth and warm, the hair beneath the cap silky soft and Justin moaned a little as he slid a hand around the back of JC's neck and pulled him closer, closer . . .

The harsh sound of a loud truck horn made him jump and dodge back to his seat, and JC laughed a little shakily as Justin cursed and flipped off the UPS van waiting to pull in behind him. He carefully checked his mirror and pulled out into the traffic as JC buckled his seatbelt, and for a little while there was silence as Justin paid attention to traffic and tried to bring his galloping heart back under control.

"So, is this your car?" JC finally asked, and Justin smiled.

"No, it belongs to my friend Lance." He risked a sideways glance at JC and hurriedly looked back at the road at the sight of him lounging in the seat beside him, at the sly smile on his face. "Uh, do you remember Lance? From that party you had last year?"

"I don't remember anything from that party," JC said lazily, "except the unusually excellent champagne and the scorchingly hot guy I persuaded to stay and spend the night with me."

"Oh, see?" Justin said with a gulp. "That's just not fair, it's not fair of you to talk to me in that tone of voice when I need to concentrate on my driving here."

JC leaned closer until his breath was warm in Justin's ear. "We could always turn around," he murmured, "and go right back to my apartment. We could get naked, and talk about it some more."

Justin laughed even as he shivered, and JC sat back. He looked pleased, Justin noted, and felt the simple delight of being together surge through him. It was going to be a really, really good day, he thought. Maybe even a perfect one.

~ ~ ~ ~

And it was, Justin thought later, as he watched JC nap in a flat, boneless heap on the blanket beside him. The sun was hot but a cool breeze drifted off the water, keeping the temperature from becoming unbearable. The small beach in Long Island that Joey had suggested was perfect -- clean and, owing to the lack of on-site food and entertainment -- relatively quiet. It was a perfect, idyllic day, and it had made Justin happy to watch JC slowly unwind.

It hadn’t started out that way. JC had grown tense at the sluggish stop-and-go traffic, muttering darkly under his breath at the actions of other drivers and back-seat driving until Justin had threatened to tranquilize him. Then he’d questioned Justin carefully and thoroughly about their destination, Justin’s plans once they reached it, and whether or not Justin knew how to get there. He’d spied Justin’s maps, examined them closely and suggested alternative, lower-traffic ways of getting there obsessively until Justin had snatched them out of his hand. Then he’d played with the radio, changing the station every time a song came on that he didn’t like, which seemed to be often.

Justin had sighed, torn between amusement and exasperation. In his experience JC was usually quiet and rather disoriented first thing in the morning. Between the early hour and the long and busy week he knew JC had had, Justin had rather expected him to fall asleep as soon as the car started moving. But JC seemed full of energy despite his slightly puffy and bloodshot eyes. He soon lost interest in the traffic, the maps, and the radio, and turned his attention to Justin, smiling gorgeously at him from behind his mirrored sunglasses and leaning over to run a warm and appreciative hand up Justin’s bare leg and inside the wide leg of his shorts, making Justin hiss.

"JC. JC! God, not while I’m driving!" he’d said desperately, and JC had laughed in delight, a happy sound that made Justin grin even as he firmly removed JC’s wandering fingers from his thigh. "Seriously, man. I’m not that good at this driving thing," he added sternly. "You don’t want to do that."

"But I do," JC said cheerfully. "I haven’t seen you this whole week, and isn’t this my birthday celebration? Don’t I get to do whatever I want today?" His smile was nothing short of breathtaking and Justin had pulled his eyes back to the road with an effort.

"Not if it gets us both killed," he’d responded firmly, but he couldn’t stop smiling and it felt so good to curl his right hand around JC’s left, letting them rest together on his thigh.

Traffic had lightened and smoothed out, and Justin had felt JC slowly, slowly relax beside him. They talked lazily and Justin snuck peeks at JC as they crossed the bridge and snaked their way down the freeway, noting his small smile, the way he tilted his face up to the sun coming through the window, the way he let his free hand hang out the window and drift through the warming air as they left the city behind.

They’d arrived at the beach without further incident. Justin had thrown a stern look at JC as they’d pulled up to the park service toll booth and JC started to reach for his wallet, and he’d subsided with a grin. He’d looked around alertly as Justin chose a parking spot, taking in the long expanse of white beach, the sparkling ocean, the clear blue sky.

"Are we going to swim?" he’d asked, and then "Where do we change? It doesn’t seem very crowded for such a hot day, does it?" and then "Should we have stopped somewhere to pick up food?" and Justin had laughed as he set the parking brake and turned the car off.

"If you want to swim, we’ll swim," he said with a smile as JC turned to face him. "There are changing rooms over there, on the other side of the restrooms, and I think the reason that it isn’t crowded is because there aren’t places to get food here, which is why I have food

packed in the trunk. In fact," he continued cockily, "I believe I've thought of just about everything. So you can stop worrying, and relax and enjoy yourself."

JC stared at him for a long moment before pulling the sunglasses off his face and leaning across the console. He tilted his head, angling slowly for Justin's mouth. "I believe I'll do just that," he murmured before clasping Justin's lips warmly and all too briefly with his own. "Thank you," he said, and with a smile that made Justin's heart skip a beat he was out of the car and headed toward the changing rooms.

It was worth the long walk from the parking lot to find a portion of the beach that was clean and relatively unpopulated. Justin spread a beach blanket and watched with interest as JC tugged off his shoes and dug his feet deeply into the sand, flexing his toes and smiling as he looked around. He'd grinned at Justin as he leaned down to help him smooth the blanket out.

"It's such a pretty day," JC had commented, and his grin had turned wicked. "Race you to the water."

The rest of the morning had passed in a haze of contentment for Justin, feeling the sun warm on his shoulders even as the cold water of the ocean caused goose bumps to break out all over his body. JC had peeled out of his shirt and flung himself into the water like a fish, seemingly heedless of the cold, and had rolled effortlessly with the small waves that crested toward shore. His grin had been wide and happy even when Justin had made fun of him, and when they'd tired and headed toward their blanket he'd walked close beside Justin and casually slipped a hand in to his, clasping their fingers together. Justin had felt happiness bloom as JC had smiled at him, all flashing teeth and mirrored sunglasses and smooth skin, and the day was bright and warm and Justin thought that if he'd ever been happier, he couldn't remember when.

And now he sat quietly on the blanket beside JC's sleeping form, eyes on the water. Far down the beach there were the sounds of children shrieking as they played in the waves and once in awhile Justin could make out tinny music coming from someone's boom box, but down on this end there was only the soothing sounds of the waves and the seabirds that flew overhead, hoping for a scrap of the lunch they'd finished. The wine made him utterly relaxed and drowsy, but he resisted sleep.

"What are you doing?" JC mumbled from beside him, and Justin looked down at him with a smile.

"Watching you drool," he said, and JC's body shook slightly as he snorted.

"I don't drool," he retorted without opening his eyes. His hand reached out and wrapped around Justin's ankle, scraping short fingernails across the thin skin on the top of his foot. Justin shivered a little and JC smiled, eyes still closed. "Not much, anyway. Seriously, what are you thinking about?"

Justin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Oh, I'm thinking all sorts of stupid and useless things," he confessed. "I'm thinking that it's perfect here, and that it's really not that far away, and worth the getting here to do this more often. I'm thinking that you look, well, better than anyone has the right to look when they're sleeping. I'm thinking about what sort

of place I want to take you for dinner, and of asking if you want to come watch me play basketball tomorrow afternoon." Justin kept his eyes on the water but he could feel that JC's eyes were open now, watching his face closely as he continued to stroke his fingers up and down Justin's foot. Justin swallowed hard. "I'm thinking that my mother is coming to visit me next month, and that I'd kind of like you to meet her." He turned his head so he could look down at JC, and smiled wryly. "I'm thinking about how I want to put sun screen on your back just so I can have an excuse to touch you. That's what I'm thinking about." He stopped and swallowed hard over the accelerated beating of his heart. "What are you thinking about?"

JC's eyes were warm and sleepy as they looked back up at him. "Mostly I'm glad that you're not thinking about work, and surprised that I'm not either," he said honestly, and he grinned as Justin laughed. His fingers continued stroking a pattern on the top of Justin's foot and around his ankle. Justin's heart rate started to accelerate. "I'm thinking that I feel better and happier than I've felt in a very, very long time, and that I have you to thank for that. And that I want to get dinner after sunset at some roadside seafood counter-service type of place where the food is very fresh and greasy, and we won't look out of place all sandy. I'm thinking that watching you play basketball might be too much for my central nervous system to handle, but that I'd really like to give it a try." His fingers moved slowly up and over Justin's ankle, gently rubbing the sensitive skin until Justin shivered in delight. "And as far as your mom coming to town, well. Let's just see how that goes. Not because I don't want to meet her," he continued as Justin looked back toward the water, "but because maybe it would be better -- smarter -- to wait until after the first of the year, when I'm not so heavily involved with the press anymore." Justin smiled at that, his heart soaring, and JC's grin simmered into something darker. "And I'm thinking that I probably don't need more sun screen, but if that's the only way I can get your hands on me on this public beach, then I want sun screen. Now."

Justin stared at him for a moment and then laughed as he reached over and grabbed the sun screen. "Hey, it's your birthday," he said cheerfully. "Your wish is my command."

"Oh, I'm going to remember that," JC murmured as he squirmed deliciously under Justin's hands, settling himself deeper in the sand. "Believe me."

~ ~ ~ ~

JC, Justin observed with some amusement, was significantly more mellow after a full day of sun and sand and water than he was first thing in the morning. The drive back to the city was accomplished long after sunset and in near-silence, with JC relaxed and quiet in the seat next to him, and his hand resting loosely on Justin's leg.

Justin kept cutting his eyes sideways to catch glimpses of JC's face, calm and still in the darkness until the lights of the bridge threw his features into sharp illumination. His lips were curved in a small, private smile that made Justin's pulse begin to pound slowly, heavily.

"Something on your mind, Justin?" he inquired lazily, and as Justin glanced at him again he saw JC's eyes were open, narrow slices of blue watching him lazily.

"I was wondering if you'd fallen asleep," he answered quietly.

"Oh, far from it," JC murmured and stretched slowly. "I guess you could say I'm conserving my energy. For the rest of the evening."

Justin caught his breath as his heart stuttered in his chest and he laughed a little to cover it. "Oh, is that right?" he asked. "I took you to the beach, fed you lunch and dinner, spent the entire day making a fuss over you. And now," he glanced over, trying to look affronted, "now, you want more?"

JC rolled his head slowly on the headrest until he was facing Justin, his smile sharp and his eyes brilliant in the darkness. "You'd better believe I want more," he said, and Justin cleared his throat.

"Oh, well. Um, I guess since it's your birthday and all," he started, and caught a glimpse of teeth as JC grinned. And now JC's warm hand was moving again, covering Justin's bare knee and sliding slowly, lightly up his thigh. Justin clenched his jaw against the surge of arousal and tightened his hands on the steering wheel. "Um. Yeah, so, what did you have in mind?"

JC turned his head, watching him closely. "Do you really want me to tell you? Do you really want to discuss this while you're driving?" he asked slyly, and Justin gulped.

"No! No, I think it would be better if you waited. Yes." He took a deep breath and struggled to avoid looking at JC. Really, it was ridiculous the way the man could discompose him. This had to stop. "All I really need to know right now," he added in as seductive voice as he could muster, "is where you want me."

He was rewarded by the sudden tightening of JC's fingers on his thigh, and the tense silence that followed. Then JC leaned close and Justin's entire body went on full alert as he spoke directly into his ear.

"I want you bent over that monstrosity of a couch in your living room with your legs spread and your ass in the air," he said quietly, his breath warm in Justin's ear, and Justin felt his mouth drop open and his eyes go wide. "I want you on your back on the floor in front of your fireplace, and I want you in the shower with your arms braced against the wall." Justin shuddered as he felt teeth sink gently into his earlobe. "I want you against the counter in the bathroom, facing the mirror," he whispered. "I want to watch you watch me while I fuck you."

"Jesus," Justin swore breathlessly as JC leaned back and smirked at him. He was never going to try to one-up him again. "You'd better not be kidding," he warned.

"Not the sort of thing I kid about, Justin," JC said mildly. "And you really should keep your eyes on the road."

"I just, oh my god, JC. Fuck." He shot another wild glance at him as they left the bridge behind and descended into the city. "Your place is closer," he said, and cursed himself for the shakiness in his voice. "We're going to your place."

JC leaned close again and Justin tensed, desperately keeping his eyes on the road. "We could do that," he said, and Justin nodded frantically, not trusting himself to speak. JC's hand

moved slowly over the bulge in the front of Justin's shorts and cupped him gently. Justin swore again and JC grinned as he leaned back.

"And not to destroy the mood here, but I think it would be better to go to your place," JC continued in an almost-normal tone of voice. "I'm having some construction and remodeling done, and there's plastic and sheet rock dust everywhere."

Justin struggled to keep up, blinking hard. Sheet rock. Construction. Mess. "Oh, really," he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice while JC smiled at him. This was a normal conversation, he could do this. "What are you having done?"

JC lifted a shoulder in a ridiculously sexy shrug. "The living room, the dining room, a couple of the rooms upstairs," he said lazily. "I just wanted some things changed."

"That sounds pretty extensive," Justin said slowly.

"It is, but they're moving pretty fast. But the mess," JC added with a smile. "So not part of the mood I'm in tonight. If you know what I mean."

Justin gulped and nodded, his mind working busily. A horn sounded loudly and he jumped, realizing he'd been sitting motionless as the traffic light turned green. JC said nothing, looking serenely out the passenger side window, and Justin took a deep breath and plunged in. "Uh, maybe you want to just stay with me? We could stop by your house and grab some clothes, and you could just, you know. Stay."

There was a long silence as JC turned and regarded him steadily. "Yeah, for a few days, if that's okay," he said finally, and Justin smiled.

"It's okay," he said simply.

"Well, thank you," JC said carefully, and then leaned close again. "And tomorrow maybe I'll be a good and polite guest," he said in Justin's ear. "But tonight, it's still my birthday. And you know what I want."

"Oh fuck," Justin said as heat flooded him again. "Yeah, yeah, and you'll get it too," he promised. "You'll get it."

September

September

Justin took a bite of his turkey sandwich, then looked for at least the twentieth time at the front door of the deli. It wasn't JC's usual day to eat here, but maybe he would come in anyway: maybe he'd walk right in that door, look straight into Justin's eyes, then flash one of the cautious, sweet smiles he allowed himself to give Justin in public. Just the thought of it made Justin grin in anticipation.

"Okay," Joey said as he joined him, dropping a fistful of napkins on the table, then easing into his chair. "So I said I had a favor to ask you."

"Whatever you need, Joe. You know I'm good for it," Justin said, still gazing at the door, and then came back to himself and narrowed his eyes a little. He suddenly had a very bad feeling that Joey was going to pawn off work on him.

"Yeah, well, that's good to hear," Joey said, his mouth full of roast beef, and then leaned to the side and fished for a folder in his briefcase. "Cause I need you more than ever this time."

Justin wrinkled his forehead in concern. "What is it?"

Joey sighed heavily. "Oh, man. I hate to bring this up again, but it's the five year plan."

"But I thought -- you already revised it, right?" Justin frowned as he flashed back to the inadequate first draft of the plan he'd seen, remembered talking about it with JC in his own apartment. He'd been so sick that day, and JC had been ruthless with questions about the report -- but JC had also brought him food; he was really so sweet, so kind, and --

"--even hearing me?"

"Sorry, sorry." Justin shook his head to clear it. "So, uh, it's revised, right?"

"Several times," Joey said darkly. "Practically once a week, actually, and each fucking time, my draft comes back totally covered in red ink. No matter what I do, it's wrong."

Justin frowned.

"And then today, I get this," Joey said, and handed Justin the entire folder. On top was a memo to Joey from JC, and as Justin skimmed it, his eyes widened and he felt his heart begin to pound. JC was in essence threatening to demote Joey if he didn't create a report that was up to standard.

"Oh, man." Justin's voice was weak and thin. "I -- he can't really mean this, Joe. He wouldn't hurt you over this."

Joey rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Look at the drafts, Justin. Look at what an ass he's been about them all."

Justin flipped unhappily through three ink-covered documents, trying not to wince as he read JC's comments: "Inadequate," "Needs further development," "Poorly reasoned," and "Are you sure?" seemed to be his favorites. The more he read, the more Justin's spirits sank, and finally he simply sat back in his chair, looked at Joey, and murmured, "Wow."

"See?" Joey gesticulated almost helplessly. "And each time I think I've given him what he wants, he covers it with more snotty comments," he furiously added. "And frankly, Justin, I'm pretty much sure at this point that no matter what I do, it isn't going to be good enough. He just -- he hates my guts."

"Oh I don't think -- I mean, even if that were true," Justin began a little uncertainly, because it was true, and he knew it even though he shouldn't have, "I seriously doubt JC would let it work against you professionally speaking. He's pretty much above board, don't you think?"

"Justin, he's threatening to demote me if I can't supply a coherent vision -- whatever the fuck that means -- for the goddamned department. Now, does that sound reasonable to you?" Joey gave Justin a pointed stare.

Justin tried not to squirm. He simply wasn't willing to answer that without having a chance to read JC's comments at length, and then to see how Joey had really responded to them. From what Justin had heard thus far, JC's ideas for the music department were actually fairly decent -- which wasn't to say that Joey's own thoughts probably weren't good, too, but at the same time . . .

"I'm really sorry," he said out loud.

"Yeah." Joey took another bite of his sandwich, shaking his head unhappily; when he had swallowed, he said, "So I was kind of -- I was hoping maybe you could help me out with this since it's suddenly so damned important."

Justin took a deep breath. "I could read a draft, Joe, sure. Definitely."

Joey looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Actually, I was kind of hoping you could help out even more than that. I thought -- well. I thought I'd maybe see if you could do the whole damn thing, because he usually likes your work, right? And so this'll be a test. If he reads it and still hates it, we'll know he has it in for me. If he reads it and likes it, then maybe he's willing to give me a chance."

Justin took a big swallow of Coke and glanced anxiously at the front door. Suddenly, the idea of JC walking in wasn't quite as appealing.

"Okay, Joey, that's just fucked up," Justin said, and sighed. "It makes no sense. Look. How about you let me read his suggestions and then I can give you a sense of where I would go with it, okay?"

Joey sighed. "Thing is, Justin? Even if I got what he was saying, I'm not sure I could deliver. I mean, he's basically -- he wants to gut my list, Justin, totally reduce the number of musicology books I can do, and when I told him that was ridiculous and stupid, he said that my opinion meant nothing unless I could come up with evidence to defend myself. And I just -- I don't know how to do sales reports or analysis, and he's Mr. Corporate Bigwig, and it's just -- it's not fair. He wants, like, *math* and shit, the kind of figures I just don't know how to deal with, the kind of thing you are good at. And so without your help . . ."

"Go talk to Carol in sales," Justin suggested, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. "Ask her to help you run some reports, to crunch some numbers. That's what I do."

"You know that shit makes no sense to me," Joey complained. "And I -- okay. Look. Either I do this right or he demotes me, and I just -- I can't bear the thought of that, you know I can't. And so if there's any way, Justin, any way you can help me with this . . ."

Joey's voice had begun to sound wheedling, and Justin was starting to feel a little trapped. "It can't be that bad. He can't demote you -- he wouldn't. Not over a single report."

Joey laughed. "If we were dealing with a normal, sane person, you'd be right about that, Justin. But Chasez isn't normal -- he isn't even human, I'm pretty damn sure."

"Joey --" Justin admonished, feeling his cheeks grow hot as anger surged through him. God -- this was so insane, so screwed in every possible way.

"I know, I know, it sounds bad, but it's true. Swear to god, Justin, when he gave me this last memo, he came into my office, threw this thing at me, and said, 'If you can't produce the kind of report I need to see from your department, then you probably shouldn't be running it.'" Joey rolled his eyes. "And of course he said it in that nasty voice of his, you know, the one where he's all quiet and stiff with disgust and he looks at you like you don't deserve to exist."

Justin widened his eyes. He didn't know that look, and he sure as hell didn't want to know it.

"Look, Joe," he tried one last time. "I think you're selling yourself short. You're a smart guy. You don't give yourself enough credit, and if you'd just sit down with this, you'd probably be able to get it done."

"Justin, please," Joey said in a low, begging voice that made Justin's stomach sink. "I'm asking you as a friend here. And if you don't want to help me, that's fine, but I just --"

"Stop it," Justin said abruptly, then grimaced at himself because he sounded a lot like JC. And what was he going to do about JC -- if he did do this for Joey, how was he going to handle deceiving JC? Everything about it was distasteful to Justin; every part of his mind rebelled against it.

But Joey looked so unhappy, so desperate, and Joey had helped him more than once himself. Thoughts of Astrid Biltingham's face once Joey had placated her, the birthday party he and Kelly had invited Justin to, and the innumerable kindnesses Joey had shown to him over the months filled Justin's mind, and suddenly, everything was hopelessly complicated.

Justin looked steadily at him. "If I do this, I'm going to do it my own way, all right? I mean, I'll do everything I can to protect your interests and your list, but if I'm writing this report, then it's going to be my suggestions about what we do, my vision for the department. It'll have your name on it, but the substance won't belong to you."

Joey slowly nodded. "Sounds reasonable," he said.

"But are you sure you want to give me that much control?" Justin looked earnestly at him. "Cause I'll be frank -- you might not like what I come up with."

Joey shrugged. "Justin, I'd rather take your worst on any day than try to appease the twisted mind of JC Chasez."

Justin suppressed a frown. "But I might -- there are things I might agree with him on. Seriously, Joey. And so really, it would probably be better if you just --"

"This is far from ideal, I know," Joey said unhappily. "And I hate that I'm putting both of us in this situation, Justin, I really hate it. But I just -- I'm fighting for my job here, okay?"

"Then maybe you should fight for it, not me," Justin tried. "Maybe --"

"C'mon, Justin," Joey said in a low voice, and Justin felt something in him break. With a sigh, he muttered, "All right. I'll do it."

"Thank you so much," Joey said. "Truly, man. I won't forget this."

Justin shrugged, still very uncomfortable, dreading what all of this would mean for him, for Joey, and for JC. "When do you need it?"

Joey looked sheepish. "Well, see, that's kind of the thing. It's actually, uh, due on Thursday."

"Joey," Justin said in a dead, flat voice. "It's Tuesday."

"I am so sorry," Joey said. "I really -- I thought I could do it, but it just -- I'm so sorry."

"Okay. Okay," Justin said, his mind working rapidly as he tried to work out a schedule, to figure out when he could reasonably devote time to it. He was going to have a couple of very long nights.

"I really, really appreciate it," Joey said, and looked solemnly at Justin. "I really -- without you, Justin, I'm almost afraid I wouldn't have a job."

"That's not true; that's absolutely not true," Justin said, then ducked his head and looked down as he realized that he was lying.

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That evening Justin sat down with the folder Joey had given him and groaned as he flipped through the pages of Joey's rejected reports. Time and time again JC had tried to get him to figure out a more fiscally responsible way of handling the musicology books, and time and

time again, Joey had either simply dodged JC's arguments or answered them in totally inadequate fashion. Moreover, he'd neglected to provide an overall framework for the music department's list, had failed to pull together everything the two of them were doing, had failed to plot a direction for them.

Justin groaned and rubbed his forehead. Joey should have known better than this.

As he read JC's comments, which were scrawled and angry-looking, Justin felt his stomach begin to clench. If he wrote this report, he was going to have to lie to JC, was going to deceive him in a systematic and deliberate fashion. And okay -- it was for the good of his friend, but did he really want to do this? Did he really want to risk everything he had with JC for Joey Fatone?

Absolutely not, but maybe things weren't that simple. If Justin could write the report convincingly enough that JC thought it was from Joey, then he could also put forth his ideas for the department -- and if he could get those implemented, then the department would be fiscally productive -- and JC would no doubt be happier with Joey. And if JC were happier with Joey, then JC would stop bothering him, and Joey would in turn stop bothering Justin, and the entire cycle would stop. It was extremely risky, but the payoff could be huge.

And Justin did have ideas for the department -- lots of them, actually.

Justin took a long, deep breath, then powered up his laptop. This was either the most brilliant or most stupid thing he'd ever done. If it worked, Joey would save face, Justin would have a plan in place that he felt good about, and JC would stop badgering the music department. That was good all around. If it didn't --

It was hardly worth considering that option -- the cost of failure was too high. Justin anxiously rubbed the back of his neck, then opened a new Word document. He was just going to have to make it work.

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At 7 a.m. the next morning Justin sat in his office and blearily rubbed his burning eyes, cursing the world. He'd been up until at least three last night, and if he was going to get the plan done on time, he'd be up at least that long again tonight. He rested his head on his hand and sighed in frustration. If Joey had the slightest idea of the position he was putting Justin in -- if he'd just fucking think about things for more than five damn minutes . . .

And if JC would just have given Joey a fucking fair chance, none of this would have been happening. The two of them were so out of line; this was absolutely, completely ridiculous.

"Hey," a quiet voice said from the door, and Justin very nearly shivered as he looked over at JC, caught the hungry look in his eyes, the suggestive curve of his mouth. Damn.

"Hi," Justin croaked, and took another gulp of coffee.

"You look like shit."

"Thank you, JC. I appreciate that."

JC laughed, then came further into the office and looked intently at him, obviously more concerned than he was going to let on. "So what happened?"

"Oh, it was just -- I --" Justin took a deep breath, tried not to wince, and then lied. "It's this manuscript. I, uh, promised the author I'd talk revisions with him today at eight, and I forgot about it until I was just about to leave the office yesterday. So last night I did a lot of reading and thinking."

JC put hands in his pockets, rocked back slightly on his heels, his face thoughtful. "That's not like you," he quietly said.

Damn JC for being so smart. Justin thought quickly, then forced himself to grin playfully. "You know, it's the strangest thing," he said in a low voice. "It's almost as if I've been distracted lately, as if I've had something, or someone, occupying my mind."

The tense line of JC's mouth slowly relaxed into a grin. "Yeah?" he softly asked.

"Yeah," Justin told him, and felt his gut twist in knots, because JC looked so . . . flattered, so ridiculously happy.

JC looked sharply out at the hallway, then stepped quickly and neatly toward Justin's desk, leaning over and coming close to burning Justin up with the heat in his eyes. "We still on for tonight?" he asked quietly, his voice low and inviting. "I've been looking forward to it a lot."

"Me too," Justin said shakily, his mind working anxiously, worriedly even as he felt himself blush in pleasure. How could he have forgotten that he and JC had plans for tonight?

"Good, then," JC murmured, then smiled at Justin, his eyes dark and full of promise, and it was all Justin could do not to moan. Not only was he going to have to write the report tonight, he was going to have to do it instead of spending time with JC -- and that was definitely not something he wanted to do.

For a moment JC looked as if he were about to lean in for a kiss, and Justin held his breath in surprise, because the door was open and there were people milling about in the hallway, but at the last moment JC slowly straightened up and moved back, glancing out the door. "Hey, Chris," he said, his voice suddenly professional and calm again.

"Hey," Chris said, peeking in Justin's office. "Look -- I hate to break up this little meeting, but if I don't get your help right now, Chasez, *right now*, I'm going to go down to marketing with a loaded shotgun, and I think you'll agree that it's probably best that we talk a little before I do that."

JC rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay. Let's follow up on this conversation later, Justin," he said, a hint of his earlier smile lingering on his lips. "Okay?"

"Perfectly fine with me," Justin said, and then carefully looked down at his desk until Chris and JC had left the room altogether.

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After JC left his office, Justin received two calls from panicked authors, one from a unrepentant overdue reviewer, and then got a visit from an irate member of the marketing department who was complaining about the diva-like behavior or one of his authors. It was a trying morning by any standard, and it was made even more difficult by the fact that Justin knew that the onslaught would continue through the evening. He drank cup after cup of coffee, which made him tense and anxious but did not get rid of the heavy, sluggish feeling in his body and mind, and tried desperately to function.

"Justin! How's it going!" Joey cheerfully said to him when he popped his head in Justin's office at midmorning, and it was all Justin could do not to snarl at him. How did Joey think he was doing?

"Um, yeah. Yeah," Joey said after a brief, uncomfortable silence during which Justin simply glared at him. "So I guess the plan's, uh, taking up a lot of your time."

"It'll get done -- don't worry about that." Justin sighed and stretched. His back was tense, the muscles strained and on the verge of contracting painfully. He was going to have to go very, very easy on it, or he'd be paralyzed by noon, and that made him angrier still.

"That's great, Justin." Joey stepped partway into the office, then lowered his voice. "I really, really appreciate this -- so much, man. After this whole thing is over, you and me -- we're going to dinner or something; we'll really live it up, okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine, that's great." Justin still felt sour. "But Joey?" he softly added, and Joey leaned in a bit. "Don't you ever ask me to do something like this again, okay? Because this is too big -- it's too much lying, and it makes me very, very uncomfortable."

Joey frowned. "Okay, J. I get that. But it's kind of -- I mean, you and me against the man, you know? Unless we stick together, Chasez'll gut our department, maybe even eliminate it entirely, so it seems right for the two of us --"

"See, Joe, that's just it. I mean, I don't think he will. I guess --" Justin breathed deep and searched carefully for the right words. "I don't know. If you and he would just stop this stupidity and work together for a change, I think you'd see that your goals for the department aren't all that different. I mean, he wants us to succeed just as much as you do even if you don't define that success in exactly the same way."

Joey stepped back a bit, his warm expression fading. "If you want to believe that, Justin, you go right ahead. I totally encourage you to believe what you need to, what makes you happy. But the fact of the matter is -- and I am dead serious here -- that JC Chasez is jeopardizing the way we work and the way we think, and I'm not --" He looked unhappily out at the hallway, scanning it for eavesdroppers. "I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to put up with this."

"Yeah, Joey. Whatever," Justin said, not caring if he pissed Joey off, not caring if he was being impolitic with his boss, because he was sick of this, sick of it all. Once the plan was done, he was stepping completely out of the Joey/JC arena.

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An hour or so later, Justin dropped his pen on his desk and tiredly rubbed his neck. He was trying to work through some permissions issues that manuscript editorial had asked him to deal with, and the project editor's note about it was just short of hostile. Normally, he'd understand -- permissions were difficult, and manuscript editorial had every right to expect acquiring editors to have them in shape before handing over manuscripts -- but there was something so rude about this note that on this given day, he was having difficulty keeping a level head.

"This should have been done months ago," the project editor had written, and Justin grumpily murmured, "Yeah, well, fuck you. I did my best" before flipping further through the file and staring in disbelief as he found clear and obvious evidence that he had already attempted to take care of it -- he had put the whole thing in motion already. What was up with this editor? Was it really that hard to follow up on something? Why did she have to fling it back at him?

Justin grimaced and wrote "LOOK AT THE FILES" on her note, then worked his way through her next comment, which was every bit as rudely written, even if she did have more of a point. He considered it for a while, his blood pressure rising as he stared at the words "This is not acceptable. Please review our permissions procedures."

Review the procedures? He'd practically written them with Derek Anderson a few months ago, and who was this woman? Who was this person with such a ridiculous, disproportionate sense of entitlement?

Justin drew a heavy red slash through the rest of the woman's note, then scrawled, "WE NEED TO TALK" over top of it and sprung to his feet, anger radiating through him, and stomped down the hall to the manuscript editorial department, glaring at office nameplates and looking for this editor's office. When he finally found it, he sharply rapped his knuckles on the door jamb, then stepped partway in.

"I got your note," he said abruptly to the woman, one Jane Perillo, and struggled for control as she looked up from the page proofs she was working on and gave him a look of deepest irritation.

Do not let her get to you, Justin warned himself, then took a slow, deep breath.

"Okay, look," he said more calmly. "I got your note and I want to work with you on these permissions, but we have to do this in a civil fashion, okay?"

Jane Perillo looked back down at her page proofs and simply ignored Justin for a few moments as she wrote something in the margins. When she finally lifted her head, she said, "There was nothing wrong with the tone of my memo."

"Are you serious?" Justin asked, and waved the memo at her. "You told me to review permissions procedures. You told me that I don't know how to do my job properly. In what possible universe is that appropriate?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Timberlake, but you don't get to abdicate your professional responsibilities just because you find them inconvenient," she tartly said. "It's annoying and time consuming to get permissions, yes, but it's your job, not mine, and I'm not going to do your grunt work just because you think you're above having to think about details."

"Look, lady -- I don't know where the hell you think you get off speaking to me like that. I work harder for this press and put in longer hours than you can even imagine," Justin snarled. "And so when you ask me for something, I expect you to do it with respect. I expect you to -- "

Justin broke off abruptly as he felt a firm, hard grip on his upper arm.

"Whatever this is, it stops now," JC said in a deadly, cold voice, and Justin grimaced as he watched a small, satisfied smile spread across Jane Perillo's face.

Fury and shame flooded Justin in equal proportion, and that made him simply fucking miserable, and this day would not end -- it absolutely would not.

"Okay, okay. Sorry," he said to Jane Perillo. "I didn't mean to talk to you like that. I'll come back later when I'm in a better frame of mind."

"You do that," she said softly, and just like that, Justin's blinding fury was back, but the second he opened his mouth to retort, JC pulled none too subtly on his arm and started to drag him down the hallway.

"Where is your head today?" he asked in a low, angry voice. "You know better than to act like that."

"Yeah, well you have no idea how fucking annoying that woman is, " Justin said, conveniently forgetting the fact that he hardly knew her. "And for her to speak to me like she did? She has no right, JC, none whatsoever."

As they reached Justin's office, JC pushed him in, then slowly drew the door shut behind them.

"She makes a lot less money than you do, Justin, and she's got a hell of a lot less power. You have no right to badger her like that. If you have a problem with her, you should speak about it in a civil fashion, not go in there like a madman."

"Look -- I don't care how fucking poor she is -- she still has no right to be such a bitch to me," Justin spat out, and then flopped angrily into his chair, still glaring.

JC came to the edge of his desk and stared at him, his expression inscrutable.

"What?" Justin belligerently said.

"Why are you acting like this? What’s gotten into you?" JC asked in a calm, measured voice, and Justin groaned inwardly, because JC was right, absolutely right. He was being an idiot.

"I know, I know," he said unhappily. He rubbed his gritty, tired eyes and felt the anger leave his body in a sudden rush. "This is just a really, really shitty day, okay? I -- look. I'll apologize to her later, I promise."

JC stared at him for a while longer, then slowly nodded.

"And I am sorry that I yelled at her. And that you had to see it," Justin mumbled as embarrassment washed over him, because it absolutely sucked that JC had witnessed him being such an asshole to an underling. He'd seen JC take people down, but Justin had never seen him raise his voice while he did it.

"It does seem like you're having a particularly bad day," JC finally commented quietly. "It happens sometimes. Is there anything I can do?"

"No," Justin said in a low voice, and sighed heavily before looking up at JC -- JC who was watching him with warm concern and sympathy, JC, who cared about him, JC, whom Justin was attempting to deceive. He quelled the panicky feelings of guilt and self loathing and tried to smile. "Thank you, though."

"Sure." JC gave him a slow smile that made Justin's heart skip a beat even through his tension headache and jittering nerves, and then glanced at his watch. "We have that meeting with Michael McNeal in an hour -- are you still up for it?"

Justin blinked and then sat up, looking intently at his desk calendar. There it was, Michael McNeal / JC, written in pen at 12:30. Why had he thought that the meeting was next week? God, he still needed to print out the advance contract he and JC had drafted, he needed to pull that file, he needed . . .

"Justin," JC said evenly, and as Justin glanced at him he realized that he'd been muttering all those things out loud. "Justin, I can take the meeting myself if you think you don't have the time."

"No, no," Justin said distractedly. "I just need a few minutes to pull the paperwork together, I can make the meeting. I want to make the meeting; I worked hard to get that book . . ."

"Okay, then," JC said soothingly. "Take a deep breath and pull yourself together, okay? This isn't life or death, you know?"

"Yes, of course, you're right," Justin said and took a deep breath. He just needed some more caffeine -- he could get through this day, he could deal with this new author, he could deal with Joey's plan -- he just needed some more caffeine and to be left alone for five fucking minutes. "I'll do that, I'm on it."

"If you're sure," JC said slowly, and then raised his eyebrows when Justin snorted and rolled his eyes.

"I'm sure! Jesus!" he snapped in exasperation. "I'll be ready to go in, what, forty-five minutes?"

"Yes," JC said brusquely, and then moved to the door as someone knocked. "I'll meet you in the lobby."

The door opened, and the worried face of Justin's assistant appeared. "Sorry, Justin, but Stephanie Whitman's on the phone and she refuses to leave a message, she says if you don't talk to her right now she's going to come down here and stake out the lobby . . ."

Justin groaned. "Yeah, yeah I'll talk to her." His phone was already ringing and the next time he looked up JC was gone.

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Justin walked out of the building where the meeting had been held with his head down, two steps behind JC both physically and mentally. Justin's briefcase held the fully executed contracts and Michael McNeal was pleased and excited to be publishing with Phoenix, but Justin had been scattered and distracted, and if he was honest with himself he knew that credit for the success of the meeting was to be laid solely at JC's feet.

He cursed himself tiredly as he trailed JC to the SUV waiting at the curb for them. He might have really blown this meeting if he'd been on his own, and that thought added to the panic jangling through his nerve endings as the driver closed the door behind them and JC raised the privacy screen. If only he weren't so exhausted, so distracted by the mound of work and his panic over the five year plan. If only he hadn't gotten himself into this situation in the first place.

And now they were in the vehicle, and JC was giving him a long, sideways glance.

"I don't understand what your problem is today," he finally said, and Justin heaved a big sigh.

"I'm sorry about that meeting," he answered, dropping his head forward and rubbing tiredly at the back of his neck. I can't believe that I practically punted the entire thing to you. Honestly, JC, I'm really sorry."

"Stop apologizing to me," JC said evenly. "I have the feeling that you would've handled that meeting just fine if I hadn't been there to punt to. But you're a wreck today, Justin, and I'm getting very tired of asking you to tell me what's wrong."

"Well, I'm just as tired of telling you that I'm busy," Justin said sharply. "I'm busy, and stressed out and I didn't get any sleep, and I don't know how many times I have to repeat myself here . . ."

JC's eyes narrowed. "It would be a very, very good idea for you to control the tone of your voice right now, Justin."

Justin heaved a deep breath and unclenched his fists. "Sorry," Justin mumbled. Why was he taking this out on JC? Jesus, he couldn't do anything right today.

"Justin," JC said, making his own tone a little more gentle. "I know there's something going on, and I want to help you with it, but I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong. So

spill it, okay? Let me help you."

"I just -- there's really not anything you can do about this," Justin said with complete honesty, the regret and unhappiness clear in his voice.

"Is it an author?" JC asked. "A contract? Are you having problems with the list?"

"No, it's not that. Nothing like that," Justin quietly, miserably said.

"Is it about Joey?" JC asked even more quietly then, and oh, he was good -- he was better than good, and Justin absolutely couldn't stop the hitch in his breath at that, or the flush that spread across his cheeks.

JC sighed. "That's what I thought," he said, and then leaned a little closer. "So we can't talk about it, then."

"No," Justin said. "I just -- I mean, it's sort of about Joey but not really, and anyway, even if it were -- and we just. We can't talk about this."

"Okay. That's okay." JC's voice was gentle now, soothing, and Justin turned to blink at him. He must really be falling apart if JC were resorting to such kindness.

"Seriously, JC. I just -- I think I need sleep, okay? I'll -- tonight I'll get some sleep or whatever and things'll be better then."

"Hmm," JC said, then slid an arm around Justin's shoulders, frowning a little as Justin tensed, then apologized, then tensed again.

"You're not going to make it through the rest of this day if you don't calm down," JC told him.

"Yeah, well, I'm afraid I don't have any other options," Justin said, wincing a little as JC's fingers rubbed a sore spot on his shoulder.

"Really?" JC asked. "You can't think of a single way to relax?"

"Not short of valium, no."

JC laughed, and then slid his hand to the nape of Justin's neck. "Okay, so why don't you let me help you out, then?" he murmured, his voice seductive and coaxing, and Justin stared in amazement at him.

"JC. You don't really mean --" His voice trailed softly off as JC's other hand slowly moved to his thigh, his fingers light and teasing. "I mean, we can't!"

"Why not?" JC whispered, then gently sank teeth into Justin's earlobe.

"Because --" Justin began, but it was hard to speak with tendrils of sensation slowly snaking their way through his body, and hard to think in the face of JC's dark, intense gaze.

"JC," he finally whispered. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so tense right now, and --"

"You know, I thought about this all morning," JC murmured, then kissed Justin's throat, his mouth warm and deliberate, his hand moving to rest on Justin's thigh. "Ever since I caught you shouting at manuscript editorial, I've been thinking about how I was going to help you relax, thinking of ways to take that tense look off your face."

Justin reached down to grab JC's hand and entwined their fingers. "Thank you. I really appreciate that -- thank you."

"But I haven't even done anything," JC said, and then kissed Justin on the mouth, his tongue warm and persuasive, and Justin felt himself start to melt, felt the tension in him give way slightly.

"You don't have to do anything -- and JC, no, you don't have to -- you absolutely don't --" Justin left off breathlessly and shuddered as JC's hand slid heavily over his groin and began to caress him.

"Shh," JC whispered as Justin fretted, as his cock swelled. "Just let it happen. Let me do this for you." And then he easily, gracefully slipped to the floor of the vehicle, his hands reaching forward for the opening of Justin's pants.

"The driver!" Justin gasped. "We can't -- it --"

"The screen is up. He’s taking the long way back to the office," JC said calmly. "I told him to."

"But the traffic, and the people outside, and there's not enough time, and I --"

"The windows are tinted, and you're with me, Justin," JC murmured. "And I run this press. Enough is however long I want it to be."

Justin laughed a little, then stiffened as JC's fingers moved to the top button of his pants.

"Relax," JC soothed.

"It's just --" Justin closed his eyes and in his exhaustion saw a kaleidoscope of unpleasant images: Joey, the five year plan, the stack of manuscripts on his desk, the list of phone messages he knew would be waiting for him upon his return. "There's so much."

"Let go of it," JC murmured. "Just for a while -- right here with me. It'll be okay. All right?"

His eyes were dark and inviting, and Justin shivered a little.

"This is strange coming from you," he finally managed to say. "I mean, you're pretty much the king of not letting go, you know?"

JC smiled. "Let's just say that maybe some of the time I've spent with you lately has shown me some of the benefits of relaxation."

Justin smiled weakly as JC gently slipped his fingers under the waistband of his pants and tugged. "So. You wanna relax?"

"I mean, I'm definitely not going to turn down what I think you're offering," Justin said, his voice shaking a little, and then felt himself begin to blush. "But I'm not sure it's possible for me to get into that kind of a mood, and it might," he continued in a low, embarrassed voice, "um, take a while, and I don't want you to have to--"

"Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything," JC said, then and drew Justin's zipper down slowly, looking into his eyes and then pausing for a moment. "Okay?" he whispered, his eyes gleaming and expectant.

"I -- yeah. Oh god, yeah. Please," Justin whispered, and then took a deep, slow breath and held it as JC eased down his pants and underwear, then slowly leaned forward. JC's tongue dragged sweetly and slowly over the head of Justin's cock, and Justin spread his legs further apart and let his head fall back as he strained toward JC, silently begging to be taken into his mouth, thrusting impatiently toward JC's soft tongue and then into the cool air when JC began deliberately kissing up and down the length of him, his breath hot and his tongue clever.

"JC. Please," Justin murmured, sliding his fingers through JC's curls, reveling in their softness and trying rather desperately to resist the urge to tighten his fingers and drag JC's beautiful mouth closer to his cock, to force him to do what he wanted him to.

JC laughed softly, then looked up at Justin, his eyes bright and pleased. "Say it again," he told him. "I want to hear it again."

"Please," Justin said immediately, because sometimes it was worth fighting JC and sometimes it wasn't, and right now he really didn't want to end up in the back of a chauffeured car sobbing with frustration, which was a state JC could put him in rather too easily for Justin's comfort.

"Mm," JC hummed, content with the concession, and then Justin was inside the slick, wet heat of JC's mouth, and it was perfect -- so hot, so tight, JC sliding up and down in exactly the right way, over and over. Justin knew he was making soft, desperate noises, and for a moment he tried to stifle them, fearful that the driver might overhear, but JC was too ridiculously good at this, too patient, careful, and skilled for Justin to hold off. And besides, JC liked to hear him -- he'd said it more than once, hadn't he?

As JC took him close to orgasm, Justin closed his eyes and clenched his fists as he felt his body begin to tighten, a gorgeous, gradual drawing up, and he knew it would grow and grow until it was nearly unbearable, until it began to release in slow, powerful, debilitating waves, and he wanted it, wanted it so much, and if he could just get there more quickly, if he could just --

"Hey, hey," JC whispered. "Relax, Justin. It's not a race, okay?"

"I know it's not, but I want -- I want you -- I want --" Justin got out, then groaned and lifted his hips from the seat, straining yet again, and JC did something pornographic and perfect

with his tongue and for a moment the world was full of white light. Justin dragged in a ragged breath, then hopefully lifted his hips again and tightened the muscles in his thighs, his back, because it felt so good to gather up like this in preparation. JC's tongue did the same thing it had a second ago and Justin cried out and brought a hand over his eyes, because this was going to be big; it was going to be huge and devastating, and damn JC for doing this to him here, in the back of a car, in the middle of the day, and he was lying to JC, planning to deceive him, and he was exhausted, and he was going to have to lie even more before this day was over, and --

Justin held his breath and grit his teeth, desperately hoping the orgasm would make his brain stop just for a second. He squeezed his eyes shut and moaned and thrust helplessly as JC sucked hard and his hand eased down to cup Justin’s balls, scratching through the short hair and making Justin’s legs jerk uncontrollably.

"Justin," JC whispered, his tongue sliding in warm circles around the head of Justin’s cock. "Look at me."

He pried his eyes open and stared helplessly at JC’s face, into his eyes, unable to look away from the warmth and the intensity he saw there. Then JC finally wrapped his lips around him and pulled him in and Justin cried out, his voice high and needy as body jerked and his mind, for a blissful few seconds, emptied.

JC smiled wickedly and sweetly at him, then slowly pulled up his underwear and trousers again before leaning over to kiss him deeply. Justin curled his fingers into JC’s shirt, closed his eyes and parted his lips for JC’s tongue, and by the time the SUV finally pulled to the curb across the street from the office building, Justin was pliant and dazed, a sense of deep well-being suffusing him.

But he had to get out of the car and go work now, and it was with a heavy sigh that Justin slowly turned toward the door.

"You're not coming?" he asked JC, who remained motionless on the seat.

"No, I have another meeting across town," JC said with a small smile. "I'll see you later, though."

Yeah. Yeah. Later. Justin grimaced as he remembered that he had not yet come up with a reasonable excuse about that, then quickly wiped the expression off his face. Now was not the time for poisonous thoughts like that, especially when JC had just been so sweet to him.

"Bye," Justin said, smiling, and then slowly pulled open the door and hopped onto the sidewalk, hoping like hell he didn't look too much like a man who'd just been having sex in the back of a vehicle.

~ ~ ~ ~

JC didn't get back to the office until 4:30: the Antaeus shareholders he'd been meeting with had been full of pointed questions about how much longer he was going to continue working for Phoenix instead of doing mergers and acquisitions for the parent company, and it had

taken some time to reassure them and calm them down. JC hated having to explain himself and his motives, particularly when he was pretty sure the people listening weren't going to understand, so he'd found the afternoon both exhausting and annoying. And when he stepped back into his own office, his assistant hurried over to him and pressed a stack of urgent messages into his hand, some from authors, some from his own staff. JC sank down into his chair, flipping idly through them, then curved his mouth into a smile when he saw Justin's name on one of them.

But once he read the message, he wasn't smiling anymore: Justin had called to tell him that he'd be working at home this afternoon and would have to cancel their meeting, which JC knew was Justin's way of letting him know that their plans for the evening were history. JC rocked back into his chair and groaned, then reached immediately for his phone. This wasn't acceptable. He had to talk to Justin, had to hear about it himself.

As the phone rang, JC frowned, then decided to call every fifteen minutes until Justin answered -- and if Justin didn't do that, then to go straight to his place and figure out what was wrong.

Actually, maybe he should just go straight to his place anyway. Despite the fact that he'd relaxed for a while on the way back from their meeting -- and here JC's body tightened appreciatively at the memory -- Justin had been strange and nervy today. Mostly, he'd been so damn tense, his shoulders and mouth taut and uncomfortable, his eyes dark with some kind of unhappiness he wasn't going to reveal, unhappiness Joey Fatone had probably put there. JC fought the anger that roused in him, but it was difficult. Justin really, really needed to open his eyes about that man, needed to see clearly and without excess emotion how self-destructive and hapless Joey had become, how toxic to the press and to the people he worked with. No doubt Justin was correct that he could be a great guy under certain circumstances, but JC certainly hadn't had the opportunity to observe it. Justin was too sentimental, too generous, too willing to help others along, and his friendship with Joey was starting to drag him down.

But, JC realized with a helpless sort of surprise he'd gotten all too used to lately, Justin's problems with Joey weren't the only reason he wanted to go talk to him right now -- the fact was that he needed to see Justin, had been looking forward very much to being with him again, and he wasn't at all ready to just let their plans go.

Something had changed in JC since he'd spent those few days with Justin during the remodeling of his own place, something subtle but undeniable. In some ways, JC figured, he'd simply been spoiled by having such unlimited access to Justin, or maybe worn down -- whatever the reason, the result was that now, always, he felt a low, steady need for Justin, an urge to connect with him, an imperative to be with him. There had been something so seductively . . . comfortable about living with him; their time together had gone beyond any power plays or awkwardness and had simply allowed both of them to finally relax in each other's presence. They had cooked together (it had been something of a disaster, but they had tried), done mundane household chores like going to the grocery, making the bed, and cleaning the kitchen -- and it was absolutely not like JC to do these things, but somehow, with Justin, he had had no problem with it. They'd gone out occasionally, but for the most part, their time together had been deliciously lazy and low key: they had lounged on the couch,

watched television, then dragged themselves back into the kitchen to do the dishes before landing in bed to make love as slowly and gradually as they wanted. It had been ridiculously intimate and domestic -- and it had been wonderful. As the end of their time together had neared, JC had almost considered asking the contractors to slow down on the remodeling job so he could have even more time, but the silliness and weakness that desire had revealed to him had been so appalling that JC simply hadn't been able to go through with it.

But his time with Justin had changed him, and JC knew it. And he had to see him today -- he absolutely had to. Grabbing his phone again, JC checked the clock on the wall. It had been seven minutes since his last call, and so it was perfectly reasonable to call once more. Yet again, however, Justin did not answer.

Okay, that was it. JC moved quickly around his office, gathering a manuscript he'd been reading, the latest financial reports he'd requested from the business office, and the five year plan from the marketing department, then stopping at Mark's desk to tell him that he was going to work at home for the rest of the day. Mark goggled at JC, not even bothering to disguise his shock, and JC fought annoyance as he stared down at him. Was the idea that he might leave the office a little early really that inconceivable? Did his assistant really think he was such a soulless robot? JC didn't want to consider the answers to these questions in any sort of depth, so he shoved it all out of his mind and headed briskly toward the elevator.

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As the car took a close left, JC stared in confusion at the phone, not at all sure he'd heard correctly, because it sounded -- it almost sounded as if Justin had just told him not to come over.

"I said I'm on my way over right now," he said, then flushed a little because he sounded kind of crazy, intense and needy.

"JC, no. It's okay. I'm -- really. Like I said before, I'm really swamped -- this last-minute deadline came up, and I really need to get some work done. And that's just not going to happen with you over here." Justin sounded reasonable, but he was also strangely distant, and JC felt alarm rise in him.

"I could let you," he said, and then added more softly, "I would let you. I want to help."

"You already helped me, remember?" Justin's voice sounded calm on the surface, but there were layers of tension and unhappiness undergirding it, and JC couldn't for the life of him figure out what was going on. It was infuriating.

"Apparently I didn't," JC told him. "Not if you still sound like that."

"JC, really," Justin said, and then laughed and sounded more like himself. "I'm really sorry about this, but you have to know that I wouldn't cancel a chance to be with you unless it was really serious, right?"

"Right," JC said, unconvinced.

"And I promise -- I will definitely make this up to you," Justin continued, and now his voice was low and coaxing, seductive, and JC felt it travel all the way through his body.

"You'd better," he said, unable to keep his voice from shaking a little.

Justin whispered. "I'll be all spread out, JC, waiting for you, and I'll be so ready -- I'll be dying for it."

"Jesus," JC said tightly as his face reddened.

"And when you find me, you can do exactly what you like, anything you want, all night long," Justin said in the same seductive voice, and then sighed and spoke normally again. "I mean, soon, but tonight's out, all right?"

"Are you sure?" JC asked, furious with himself for sounding so disappointed but unable to control the tone of his voice.

"JC, I'm going to be up all night with this manuscript, and even then I'm not sure I'm going to get it read, so you just -- you'd better let me do that. Alone." Justin had raised his voice just a little in warning, and JC narrowed his eyes.

But JC took a deep breath and tried yet again. "Look -- whatever's bothering you, I could --"

"Tomorrow, all right? Tomorrow," Justin firmly said, and hung up.

"Tomorrow," JC told the dial tone as hurt spread over him, and then slowly closed his phone and told the driver to take him home.

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The next day Justin slunk into the press, headed straight for Joey's office, then slapped the five year plan down on his desk.

"Is this --" Joey began.

"Yeah. And you'd -- before you give it to JC, you'd better read it all the way through, Joey, okay? I might have made it sound like you, but it's my report in essence, and it's full of things you'll need to be familiar with. And because it's different from the earlier drafts, JC will probably quiz you on it even more after he reads it, or at the very least want to talk about it." Justin stifled a yawn and looked at Joey with dull eyes. He did not look sufficiently impressed with the gravity of the situation.

"Joey, I'm serious, okay? Read it. Every last page."

"I will, I will," Joey said.

"And I'll send you the electronic file by e-mail. Download it onto your machine, delete the message, then empty your trash."

Joey rolled his eyes, and Justin felt fury well up in him..

"Look -- this is important. What we're doing with this -- well. We could get into a lot of trouble, you know?"

Joey leaned back and gave Justin a long, level stare. "I think you'll probably be okay no matter what, Justin, so don't sweat it, all right?" he said in a strange, even voice.

Justin stared anxiously at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What? Oh." Joey paused, then gave Justin one of his warm smiles. "Nothing. Really. It's just that Chasez is so fond of your . . . work."

"Yeah," Justin said, still uncomfortable, and looked closely at Joey, but now Joey looked guileless and friendly again, and so slowly the anxiety began to ebb away.

"So yeah. I'll read through this, hand it in, and be in the clear," Joey said easily. "And tonight, you and me, we're going out for dinner, just like we planned. My treat."

"Uh, would sometime early next week be okay with you?" Justin asked, because after last night, he really, really needed to spend some time with JC.

"Absolutely, man. Tell you what -- let's talk about it Monday, and we'll make plans then."

"Great," Justin said, then slowly backed out of Joey's office, headed to his own, and sat anxiously by his phone and tried to think of how he was going to talk to JC.

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JC's Sunday afternoons had increased appreciably in quality since he'd begun seeing Justin. They'd taken to waking up late, going for a jog followed by brunch, and then stopping at the office to gather up work to bring back to Justin's apartment. Then, laptops whirring and legs stretched out on the couch, they'd sit in companionable silence and work either until dinner or until they couldn't keep their hands off each other any longer. Some afternoons very little work got done, but JC didn't mind, which was either a sign that Justin had made him insane or that he was mellowing out a bit. He still wasn't quite sure which.

JC shifted a little on the couch, grinning to himself as he watched Justin chewing on his lip and staring intently and almost fiercely at the manuscript in his lap. It had been annoying him all afternoon, and JC knew that it would only be a matter of time before he cut loose and started ranting about it. It gave JC deep pleasure to see that Justin was infinitely more relaxed than he'd been last week -- the tightness in his shoulders was gone now, as was the dark, haunted look in his eyes. Seeing Justin so obviously miserable had been strangely difficult and painful for JC, almost unbearable, and so he was vastly relieved to see Justin back to himself.

But his overall sense of well-being faded a bit as he looked down at his own reading material: the five year plan Joey Fatone had carelessly dropped on his desk on Thursday at midmorning. Each draft JC had seen of it had been mediocre, and he had no reason to believe that anything significant would have changed about it. And once he read it and was annoyed by it, he was going to have to figure out what to do about it, what to do about Joey Fatone in

general, to whom he'd virtually promised a demotion -- and then what to do about Justin, who would obviously be very upset about it. JC sighed and snuck a look at Justin to make himself feel better.

Eventually, however, he picked up the plan and began to flip through it, and apparently -- apparently Joey had finally taken some of his criticism seriously, because even the typeface and the formatting of the document were markedly improved. JC flipped listlessly through the entire thing, then raised eyebrows in surprise as he came to the back: several financial scenarios and possible list strategies were outlined, and damnit if Fatone hadn't learned to use a database. JC frowned. It was so, so unlikely, and yet here it was in his own two hands. Maybe people could change.

Grabbing his pen from the coffee table, JC went to the beginning of the plan and began to read, his brow creasing in surprise as he moved through it. This was just strange, and almost a little unsettling. Somehow Fatone had had the foresight to start over again from scratch, and apparently, he'd been listening rather more closely to JC's suggestions for revision than JC had given him credit for.

Well, stranger things had happened, and who was JC to question how or why this had happened? The thing to do was read and feel grateful that at long last the man might be coming on board.

Several minutes later, however, the pleasant surprise JC had been feeling started to mutate into something a lot less comfortable. The report read like Fatone; the writing was fairly familiar to JC, who'd seen paragraphs and paragraphs of his copy, but there was something . . . off about it, something JC couldn't quite put his finger on. It was just that in certain passages, the report seemed to take on an entirely different character, to embody a set of ideas and principles that JC had heard before, but not from Joey. Not ever from Joey.

JC looked over at Justin, who was mumbling in exasperation and scrawling in the margins of his manuscript, and then back down at the report. Joey and Justin had probably talked about it, had probably talked in great detail about the future of the department. If JC had been a manager writing the plan, he would have talked to his staff, too, would have picked their brains as much as he could. Granted, he'd told Joey not to consult with Justin while writing this, but if Joey had disobeyed him, that was perhaps for the best, because this report was definitely much better than anything Joey had even given to him before. If only it didn't feel so weird. Had something gone on here? Had Joey and Justin worked together to --

"What're you frowning at?" Justin's voice was warm and amused, and he'd reached out to wrap warm fingers around the arch of JC's bare foot.

JC glanced almost guiltily down at the five year plan and then back up into Justin's clear, beautiful eyes and felt something deep inside him relax. Justin was his -- loyal and honest, and possibly even -- well. There were feelings emerging in this relationship that JC wasn't quite comfortable naming yet, but that didn't mean that they didn't exist.

But the point was . . . the point was that Justin was above-board and true, and there was absolutely no reason to doubt him. And Justin was also now slowly sliding his big, strong hand up the length of JC's calf, worming its way underneath his sweats and brushing warmly,

fondly over JC's warm skin. JC shivered a little at the easy intimacy of the touch, the incredible gentleness and assuredness of it, and smiled at Justin.

"Nothing really. Just another in a long series of boring reports," JC said, then laughed and bent his leg a little as Justin tickled him right behind his knee.

"Yeah, well we've been sitting here for two good hours at least," Justin said, and slowly raised his eyebrows. "Maybe, you know. We should take a little break or something."

JC put the five year plan face-down on the coffee table and then leaned forward to grab Justin's hand and pull him toward him, grinning as Justin squawked and quickly set the manuscript in his lap down on the floor.

"Come here," JC said, his voice husky, and watched as Justin's eyes darkened, as he unconsciously licked his lips before slowly, eagerly moving right where JC wanted him, between his legs and on top of him, and this -- the fact that the two of them could fit like this on the couch -- was the single good thing about this particular piece of furniture, JC dreamily thought right before he opened his mouth for Justin and moaned.

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Justin was scrolling through his e-mail, ruthlessly deleting anything he didn't happen to feel like reading on this given Monday afternoon, when Joey stepped into his office and shut the door.

"I don't want you to panic about this," he said, and Justin stared at him.

"Okay, so now that you've just ensured that I will, what is it?"

Joey laughed a bit, obviously uncomfortable, then said, "Chasez just called me. He wants to meet with us in half an hour."

"Why?" Justin held his breath as he waited for an answer, thinking uncertainly back to his last interaction with JC: it had been late in the morning, and JC had caught his eye in the hallway and given him a small, secret smile. There had been absolutely nothing strange about it, nothing to indicate that JC was upset or that anything was off.

"Are you kidding? No way he'd tell us that up front," Joey said contemptuously. "He wants us to sweat first, wants us anxious and worried by the time we go up there. He couldn't possibly just say what was on his mind or something. That would be too . . . human or something."

"Joey, I'm sure it's noth--" Justin began, then jumped a little when his phone rang, an internal call.

"Well, then. That's probably your summons," Joey said, and stood up. "Look -- come get me right before, all right? I don't wanna walk into that bastard's office alone."

Justin nodded weakly, then grabbed the phone and held his breath as JC said, "Justin, it's me."

"Hey," he said, infusing his voice with warmth, and waited for a response.

"I'd like to meet with you and Joey in about half an hour," JC said, his voice flat and businesslike and absolutely devoid of emotion. "In my office."

"Okay, okay," Justin said, and fidgeted a little. "Can you, uh, tell me what this is about?"

"Not really, no," JC said. "See you in thirty."

"Bye," Justin said, but JC had already hung up the phone.

That was when the panic began.

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He'd felt uncomfortable in JC's office before, but certainly never to this extent. When JC had greeted him and Joey, his eyes had been cool and shuttered, revealing nothing; he'd practically looked through them, in fact, before gesturing for them to sit on the two chairs in front of his desk. Joey had crossed his arms and thrust his chin out, all belligerence, an act Justin desperately hoped he'd lose, because really, this whole thing could be something completely innocuous. JC could be in a bad mood for reasons Justin and Joey had nothing to do with -- that certainly seemed to happen enough -- or he could be angry about something that wasn't their fault, something he didn't fully understand. JC was sharp about publishing, but he didn't know everything.

But Justin's explanations sounded lame even to himself, and when JC stood up and left the office for a moment, he looked straight at Joey and didn't try to hide the concern in his eyes.

"I don't know, Justin -- I've been wracking my brain the same as you have," Joey finally said, then sighed and turned toward him. "There's nothing you can think of either, right? I mean, beyond the obvious?"

Justin shook his head.

"Okay, well, if that's what it is then that's what it is. We show a unified front and we back each other no matter what. We can get through this."

"I'm actually wondering maybe if we shouldn't just tell him," Justin carefully murmured, eyes locked on the door.

Joey laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. "Now why does that not surprise me --" he started, and Justin's eyes were just beginning to widen in shock as JC came back into the room. He looked particularly formidable today in a closely cut black suit, and as always, he moved with grace and assurance, completely controlled and self-possessed. Even in the middle of his growing distress, Justin found himself almost gaping in appreciation: JC was just so damn beautiful.

Right before JC took his chair, he glanced at Justin, and for a single hopeful moment, Justin searched his eyes for warmth, but all he found was a remote, impersonal gaze that made him want to flinch.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to talk to you about the five year plan Joey compiled for your department," JC said crisply, then leaned back in his seat and looked from Joey to Justin and

back again. "There were some very interesting ideas in it, and I'd like to flesh them out a bit with both of you."

"Yeah, sure. Great," Joey said, looking a little bit appeased, and Justin nodded pleasantly as well, and for just a moment things felt almost civil.

But as Justin watched JC, he knew better than to believe that: the set of his mouth was much too tense, and as he looked at Joey, his eyes were almost, well, predatory -- cold, calculating, and ruthless. Justin would have done anything in the world not to be the recipient of such a gaze, and in a rush, he suddenly understood exactly why JC was so effective in the business world, could tell exactly how he had helped his family build its empire. It was both impressive and unsettling, and Justin had a sudden, ridiculous urge to laugh out loud. What had he and Joey been thinking? How on earth had they thought that they could fool this man?

And as he looked again at JC, Justin's worry increased, because JC's body language was all wrong. Instead of sitting up straight in his chair, he had leaned back, almost sprawling a bit, and Justin knew better than anyone that JC was at his most dangerous when he seemed the most relaxed. Worse still, he was gripping the armrests of his chair. Usually JC's hands roved restlessly as he talked or as he listened, particularly when he was in a receptive mood, but right now it looked almost as if he was searching for an anchor of sorts, no matter how cleverly he controlled the gesture.

"All right, so let's do this," JC said a second later, sitting up and then flipping through the plan. Justin wanted desperately to crane his head so he could see which part of the report JC was looking at, but he knew better than to try to get away with that.

"JC, how would you feel if we went to get our own copies of the document?" Joey suddenly said, and Justin clenched his jaw in worry, because that was just -- well, so, so stupid of him. But Joey was oblivious -- so oblivious, in fact, that he then added, "We'd like to be able to discuss this in depth with you."

JC shook his head in faint disgust, then looked straight at Justin, his expression full of frustration and scorn, and Justin dragged in a long, slow breath and felt his heart begin to pound heavily against his ribs. This was going to be bad.

"Justin hasn't seen the report, of course, Joey, but if you want to go get your copy, he and I will be glad to wait for you," JC smoothly said, and Justin immediately, desperately thought, *Do not leave this room*, but of course, Joey bustled off.

After the door had swung shut behind him, JC stared hard at Justin yet again, his eyes cold and sharp and unwavering.

"JC --" Justin began, and his voice shook a little bit. "Look -- obviously, I don't know what you're thinking, but --"

"Don't," JC said, and now his voice was furious, not so well controlled at all.

Justin nodded miserably, then looked anxiously back at the door, and then realized that that made him look desperate and weak and so tried to look at JC again.

"It's just that -- you seem very angry, and it'd be good to know what's upsetting you so Joey and I can address it," Justin said, trying to make his voice as open and reasonable as possible, hoping to calm JC down a bit. "We want to work with you -- we want to be on board, and our department will absolutely --"

"Look -- if there's a point during this meeting when you want to talk honestly and openly, you do that, but until then, I don't want to hear a word out of you. Understand?" JC looked down at the floor for a minute, and it was all Justin could do to stop himself from trembling in the wake of the fury and hurt he could tell JC was repressing.

"Yeah. I understand," Justin finally said.

"Good," JC bit out, and then started to say more, but caught himself.

"But JC, if you don't let me talk to you, then I can't --" Justin began, then broke off abruptly and leaned uncomfortably back in his chair when JC gave him a look that could cut glass.

"Okay, here goes!" Joey said a moment later, settling into his chair and smiling at them both. Justin smiled back weakly; JC did not.

Looking back down at the report again, JC said, "One of the things that interested me most, Joey was your decision to decrease the number of musicology books on the list, especially given the fact that your figure of 45 percent had been consistent in all previous drafts of this report. Why the sudden change of mind?"

"It's fairly obvious, isn't it?" Joey said off-handedly and glibly, all of a sudden completely behind an idea he'd done nothing but excoriate before, and Justin turned his head to look out the window, unable to look into JC's eyes as he took that in.

"Maybe so, but sketch it out for me anyway," JC said with amazing patience.

"In a word? Sales." Joey gestured expansively. "My books aren't making us money and Justin's are. We need to keep my books on the list because they're important, but even more than that, we need to be fiscally responsible, just like you're always telling us. And this department is absolutely on board with that program."

"Mm," JC thoughtfully said, flipping through a few more pages. "But what about this appendix, though, the one in which you showed that owing to library sales, monographs almost always offer sure money? Trade books tend to be riskier, as I'm sure we both know. That complicates things a little, doesn't it?"

"Look, JC, we're not going to try to force more monographs on you -- I promise," Joey said. "Our strategy will be simply to choose our trade books carefully, something I'm pretty sure we can do well, mostly because we've got Justin to do that."

"Right," JC drawled, eyes still on the report, and Justin blushed fiercely, because the point of that appendix had been to show JC that they could actually do far more monographs than first seemed apparent -- something Joey most definitely should have been interested in talking about and interested in defending.

"Tell me, Joey," JC continued, and looked straight into Justin's eyes for a long, horrible moment. "What formula did you use for inventory write-off in this appendix?"

Joey shifted slightly in his chair. "It's not there? I didn't put it in?"

JC calmly raised eyes to Joey. "You tell me."

Joey flipped quickly through the pages until he came to the appendix, then stared blankly at it.

"I could probably take a look at it for you there, Joe," Justin began, and then winced as JC softly said, "Now why would you do that?"

"I don't know -- I just --" Justin floundered, furious with himself, and then let Joey interrupt him.

"You know, I can't remember that formula right now, being that it's a minor detail and all, but I'd be happy to get it for you after this meeting," Joey offered.

"Thank you, Joey. I'd appreciate that," JC said softly and then flipped a few more pages in the report.

And on it went for at least half an hour, JC carefully, gently asking Joey about points of logic in the report with Joey giving adequate explanations only half the time. JC didn't call Joey out on his missteps; he just kept moving smoothly forward, coaxing Joey bit by bit into revealing, despite himself, that he was clearly not the author of the report. By the time JC began patiently questioning Joey about the financial reports at the end of the document, Justin was clenching his jaw so tightly it ached, his face aflame and his stomach roiling. JC was absolutely eviscerating Joey, and Joey didn't have the slightest idea.

"All right, then -- one final question and then we're through," JC said, and Justin tiredly looked up, waiting to hear it.

"Okay, shoot," Joey said pleasantly.

"This last section of the report -- the one showing that the department should hire another acquiring editor in the next year or so. Any thoughts on whom we might contact for that?" JC asked, and Justin held his breath, held it for long, horrible moments, because the report he had written contained no such section, nothing even remotely like it, and Joey would know that only if he'd read the whole thing.

"Jesus, JC, give a guy a chance, willya?" Joey said, laughing a little and shifting in his chair. "When I wrote that, I have to say that I had absolutely no idea who --"

"All right. That's enough," Justin finally said, and two sets of eyes swung over to him, one full of surprise, the other dark and satisfied. "This is a farce, and you know it, JC, and I don't see why you have to handle it like this, why you didn't just say --"

"Don't you dare lecture me about being up-front," JC immediately shot back. "Absolutely not from where you're sitting." He broke off, then leveled a steady, intense gaze at Joey. "But

since Justin wants to be honest now, why don't we all try it? Did you write this report, Joey? Is this your work?"

Joey leaned back in his chair, put a hand over his eyes. "Jesus," he exhaled.

"A simple yes or no will suffice," JC said, but Joey didn't speak or uncover his face.

"JC, I wrote it, okay?" Justin said in a low voice, and winced as he watched a look of hurt and disappointment flash across JC's face. "And it wasn't, I don't know, a power play or done to upset you so much as it just -- Joey and I both know that I'm better at that kind of thing, so we thought it'd be better if I --"

"Thank you for the information, Justin," JC said, his voice expressionless. "You can go now."

Justin raised his eyebrows in shock, then leaned forward in his chair. "But I want to explain -- I want to --"

"Out," JC said, looking pointedly at the door. "Get out right now. Joey and I will take this from here."

Justin looked helplessly at Joey, who wouldn't meet his eyes, then back at JC, who wouldn't stop staring at him, and then slowly and unhappily got to his feet and left the room.

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Panic changed the world, Justin thought disjointedly as he walked down the hall to the spiral stairs that would take him back to his own office. Around him the bustle of the press swirled as usual, but to Justin it all seemed like a slow motion news reel. It was his own perceptions that had changed -- the heavy pounding of his heart muffling the sound of his co-workers' conversations, the blurring of his vision forcing him to blink hard to watch his steps as he negotiated the spiral staircase to the main floor. Everything around him seemed murky and far away, buried beneath the strength of his turmoil.

Once in his office he carefully and quietly shut the door behind him. He was sweating, and his hands were shaking a little. He sat down slowly behind his desk, staring blindly at the manuscript he'd been working on when the summons to JC's office had come. It seemed strange and unfamiliar, like he'd last seen it a year ago instead of half an hour ago. Justin leaned back and forced a deep breath into his constricted lungs, trying to calm himself and make sense of his jittering thoughts.

It was a futile exercise. His mind bounced erratically from brutal relief at having finally been dismissed from JC's pressure cooker of an office, to a paralyzing anxiety about what JC and Joey would say to each other in private, to a nausea-inducing terror over what would happen next, what sort of action JC would take against them. Dread crawled through him, making goose bumps leap out on his arms.

Reluctantly, Justin recalled JC's rigid posture and icy cold eyes as he'd asked question after question about the five year plan. He'd been so utterly cruel and deliberate, he thought as he rubbed his face miserably. The memory of how completely JC had controlled the meeting,

how gently and heartlessly he'd led Joey into making the damning admissions made Justin's skin crawl. It had been impressive, Justin admitted shakily. Like watching a master chess player toy with an amateur. But so very brutal. So very cold.

Jesus. Justin had known that JC was capable of being utterly ruthless; one didn't get to where JC was without such qualities. And Justin had seen such qualities up close and personal, he reminded himself bleakly as he pushed away from his desk and started to pace. He'd seen it in JC's eyes when he'd negotiated contracts, when he conducted business overseas by teleconference. He'd even, he forced himself to remember, seen it at dawn one morning just over a year ago, when JC had smiled gently at him and then dismissed him from his bed.

Justin gulped a deep breath, trying to control the sickness that rolled through his stomach and made fresh sweat break out at his temples. He'd forgotten lately, had willfully put aside the harsher aspects of JC's character. He'd allowed himself to relax and enjoy the gentler parts of JC that he'd been allowed to see -- the man who curled close to Justin and grumbled unhappily when the alarm went off in the morning, the one who remembered that Justin hated green peppers and made sure that the pizza delivered wouldn't have them, the one who made special trips to another floor of the office building just to lean in Justin's doorway and say a quiet hello.

But those parts were only small pieces of the whole. And after this morning's meeting, Justin didn't kid himself that they were the bigger part.

His thoughts ricocheted again between horror and distaste at JC's treatment of Joey and a sickly, creeping shame for his own part in the whole ridiculous five year plan fiasco. He cursed himself for agreeing to do the plan. He cursed himself for not forcing Joey to work with him on it, for not making him be involved. He cursed himself for trying to lie to JC about it. He wished fervently that Joey had had the wherewithal to save himself, and then he cycled around again to the guilt and shame of preparing the plan in the first place. He fretted uselessly about the meeting going on between Joey and JC, just one floor up.

Perhaps JC would fire them both. Maybe -- and at this thought, Justin's stomach rolled heavily again, making his vision swim -- maybe JC would just eliminate the entire music department. The thought of losing the job he loved and was so proud of didn't bear thinking about; the thought of everyone in the department losing their jobs because of him made him want to throw up. Justin stared unseeingly out his window, chewing furiously at his lip and fighting the urge to pace like a caged animal. How had he gotten into this incredible mess?

Justin slowly realized he was standing stupidly in the middle of his office, staring wide-eyed at nothing. He shook himself out of his reverie and walked out of his office in search of something to drink. A soda, something with harsh carbonation that would cut through the foul taste in his mouth. It wasn't even 11:00. How soon would JC summon him again? How was he going to walk the halls and sit at his desk and get through this day without having a complete meltdown?

A muffled crash startled him as he passed Joey's office and he hesitated and tensed. Surely Joey's meeting with JC couldn't be over yet. It couldn't possibly have gone that quickly, there was no way. His heart starting to pound heavily, Justin pushed open the door to Joey's office and peered in.

There was Joey, red faced and sweating, moving quickly around his office. He was scooping items off the top of his desk -- pictures and knickknacks, picking them up and throwing them carelessly into the open box on his chair. As Justin watched he reached over to his wall and pulled a framed award off it, dropping it in the box. Justin heard the glass crack and he blinked, his tension level spiraling upwards again as Joey hissed a curse.

Joey turned suddenly toward the door and froze when he saw Justin in his doorway. For a long silent moment they stared at each other. Joey didn't smile and didn't invite Justin in, and after a tense moment he averted his eyes and continued to throw his personal items into the packing box with barely controlled violence.

"Joey," Justin said quietly, alarm prickling through him. "God, Joey, what happ . . ."

"What do you think happened?" Joey answered tightly. The look he shot at Justin was cold and as hard as a blow. Justin blinked in astonishment. "That asshole fired me."

"Oh my god," Justin breathed in horror, leaning heavily against the door as all his worst-case scenarios came vividly to life. "Oh fuck, Joey,"

"Yeah," Joey said tersely, turning to grab photos off his credenza. "He had the memo all prepared and ready to go, even before he called us in there. He'd been planning it." He looked up sharply, his mouth twisted. "And do me a favor and stop pretending like you didn't know it was coming. Stop acting like you fucking care."

Justin felt his mouth drop open in shock. "What are you talking about? You think I don't care?" he asked in confusion. "Joey, if I didn't care I wouldn't have killed myself on that five year . . ."

"Oh, yes," Joey interrupted, tossing another handful of personal items carelessly into the box. "The plan. Excellent work, Justin. Really, really fine work." Joey's eyes blazed with fury, devoid of his usual humor and liveliness. Justin almost didn't recognize him. "Just full of amazing and ground-breaking ideas. You must be so very proud." Joey turned his back on Justin and started grabbing books off the shelf above his desk.

"Wait a minute," Justin started in dismay and a steadily rising outrage. "I don't understand why you're pissed off at me, here."

"I don't know, Justin," Joey said stiffly. "Maybe because I'm feeling that there's a whole lot going on that you've been hiding from me. Like maybe your career ambitions. And maybe some selected essential facts about your personal life." He glanced up at Justin, his eyes sharp. "Or maybe they're both the same thing." Justin inhaled sharply, his blood running cold as Joey turned away to grab two more books, throwing them hard into the box. "Or maybe," Joey continued, his voice shaking with fury, "maybe because I'm feeling like you sabotaged me." He shot another black look at Justin. "Or conspired against me."

Justin closed his mouth with an audible snap. "Joey. I don't believe . . . you asked me to do it! You asked me for my help on this! And I did it because I wanted to help you. Because I wanted help all of us, the whole department."

Joey threw the final book into the box and grabbed the lid, placing it firmly over the top.

"Well, that's tremendously touching, Justin," he said tightly. "So nice to know that you have everyone's best interests at heart. And you know what? A week ago you could've fed me that line and I would've totally believed you. Because that guy, the one who cares about books and publishing and this department and his friends -- that's the guy I asked to help out with the five year plan. That's the guy that I wanted on my side, on the music department's side."

"What are you saying?" Justin said, hating the way his voice shook. The misery of the past week swirled dizzily through his mind -- the way he'd shouted at the woman in editorial, the plans he'd canceled with JC, the lies he'd told, the tension and stress as he'd fallen so desperately behind in his own work, just to help out Joey. Words tumbled through his mind and tangled painfully in his throat, rendering him mute as Joey pulled open his desk drawer and grabbed his office keys, slamming them down on the middle of his desk.

Joey shrugged into his jacket and heaved the box into his arms. He walked past Justin without looking at him and headed for the door. Then he paused, and Justin watched as he turned and leaned close to him, face hard and eyes snapping with fury.

"I'm saying," Joey said quietly, viciously, "that I thought I was asking for help from my friend. From someone I could trust. If I'd known that I was, in fact, counting on that asshole Chasez's personal fuck toy," he paused as Justin drew a deep, shuddering breath, "I would've saved myself the trouble."

Justin's entire body went cold and rigid. "You have no right," he said quietly, straining to keep his voice under control. "No fucking right . . . you don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Oh, sure you don't," Joey jeered just as quietly, his teeth clenched. "I saw you roll out of his car last week with your fly unzipped, looking like you'd just . . ." he stopped, his nostrils flaring as he leaned away. "It doesn't matter," he continued, although it was obvious from his face that it did. He turned away and took a step toward the door, giving Justin one more cold glance. "Good luck with your career and your life, Justin," Joey said tightly. "You're going to need it." And with that he was gone.

Justin stared unblinkingly at the doorway, his heart stuttering and his breath growing short. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists at his side and still Joey's words reverberated through his head, echoing harshly through the deep and rapid pounding of his heart. He took a few slow steps out into the hallway, only dimly aware of the curious and questioning eyes on him from his co-workers. He half-turned toward the kitchen, his original destination, and stopped, breathing heavily. Then he spun around and strode toward the spiral staircase to the executive level, moving fast.

By the time Justin reached the top of the stairs he was almost running. He blew by JC's surprised assistant without seeing him and lunged into JC's office through his partially open door. There he froze, breathing hard and staring across an acre of pristine carpet at JC, sitting quietly at his desk and writing on a notepad with one his criminally expensive pens.

JC didn’t even glance up at him. "Not now, Justin," he said coolly and Justin flushed with rage.

"You’re busy right now?" he asked quietly, keeping his voice from shaking with an effort that made his fists clench.

"As you can see," JC said levelly. He never stopped writing.

Justin stared at his bent head, the sharp line of his cheekbone. "I’ll wait," he said tersely.

Several moments went by as Justin fought to control his roiling tension and anger and JC continued making notes as if Justin wasn’t there. Finally JC tossed his pen down and sat back in his chair, his blue eyes settling coldly on Justin. "Close the door," he commanded quietly.

Justin moved stiffly to the door and shut it softly, avoiding the curious glance of JC’s assistant, seated outside his office. He spared a thought for the gossip mill that must be grinding over Joey’s sudden exit, and then turned back to face JC.

JC, who had risen from his desk and was looking at him with a tight-lipped and shuttered expression that gave absolutely nothing away. "I should tell you," he said quietly, and there was a menace to his tone that made Justin quail inside, "that I’m not in the mood to discuss this with you. I’m not in the mood to discuss anything with you right now, Justin."

Justin took as deep a breath as his tight chest would allow, letting it out slowly and praying that his voice wouldn’t crack. "I understand," he said, his voice as quiet as JC’s had been. "I just need to ask . . . See, I saw Joey, packing up, and I need to talk to you . . ." He trailed off and fought for control as JC’s eyes narrowed dangerously. "You’re angry, I get that you’re angry, and I can’t say I really blame you."

"Oh, how generous," JC bit out, and Justin hurried on.

"But, seriously, JC," he continued desperately. "In all seriousness, I truly think you’re overreacting. I think, if you realized the sort of pressure you put on people, on Joey, you would maybe understand why this all, well, went down the way it did."

There was silence for a long and excruciatingly painful moment as JC stared at Justin and Justin struggled to keep from fidgeting. "I honestly can’t believe I’m hearing this," JC finally said flatly. "Think about who you are talking to."

Justin grit his teeth. He wasn’t an idiot. Of course he knew who he was talking to, he thought angrily. He was talking to a man who’d made a reputation for himself in the international arena as a ruthless businessman with exacting standards, someone who never hesitated to put pressure on other people. He was not known as a nice guy, or even a fair adversary, Justin thought shakily. He was someone who got what he wanted, and won no matter what the cost.

But this wasn’t global business, Justin thought with a fresh surge of outrage. This was publishing: it was a completely different world, and the weapons JC was accustomed to wielding had no real place here.

"The thing is," he started tersely and then broke off, his eyes bouncing away from JC's stony face and rigid posture to fix jerkily on a point over his left shoulder. "I'm not saying it wasn't wrong," he continued, his voice low. "I know it was wrong. But the fact remains that if you hadn't put the sort of pressure on Joey that you did, if you hadn't tried to run this place like it was one of your big global conglomerates, none of this would have happened. Joey wouldn't have felt like he needed to ask me for my help, and . . ." Justin choked back his next words as JC's face darkened furiously.

"And what?" he asked curtly. "You wouldn't have helped him when he asked you to bail him out? You wouldn't have felt the need to go against the director's express instructions? You wouldn't have thought you could get away with this sort of lie?"

Justin stood frozen, his fists knotted painfully at his sides. Words flew through his head -- angry words, accusatory words, defensive words -- but none of them made it to his mouth as his throat closed painfully.

"Nothing to say to that," JC observed coolly. "How interesting. And so disappointing," he added, "especially after such a dramatic entrance." He turned again to look out his window, and Justin clenched his jaw, took a deep breath, and made one more try.

"JC," he said slowly. "You never really made an effort to understand the things that Joey does well, all the things that he does that add to the press. I really, really think you've made a mistake here. I think firing Joey . . ."

"Stop it," JC commanded shortly. "Stop it right now. Do yourself a favor and disabuse yourself of the notion that you have any right whatsoever to tell me how to run my business. Because it is a business, Justin, this press is a business and its business is to make money. And when an employee fucks up as spectacularly and regularly as your friend Joey, it costs the press money. It costs me money. The plagiarism," and he lifted an eyebrow as Justin winced at the use of the word, "was just icing on the cake. The plagiarism just made it easy."

Justin was trembling, emotions battering him as he tried to remain composed. "Well, then. Shouldn't you be firing me too?" he asked furiously. "According to the way you do business, I deserve it at least as much as Joey does. Maybe more."

Justin watched as JC's jaw tightened and he took a long and deep breath. When he continued his voice was remote and completely passionless. "I've already warned you once," he said tonelessly. "Do not make the mistake of telling me what to do again. And perhaps instead of being so concerned about Joey, you should look to yourself," he continued, pointedly turning away to look out at the city's skyline. "I'm not going to fire you -- yet -- because the music department needs you. You're going to be interim manager for the department and it's going to be your responsibility to ascertain exactly how badly Joey fucked things up." The glance he shot at Justin was so cold he almost shivered. "You're going to report directly to me, and if I discover that you're lying to me again, or that you're trying to cover anything up, the entire music department is history." He waited a beat as Justin struggled to digest this. "I presume I've made myself clear," JC said darkly. "You can go."

It cost him to stand his ground but Justin did it, lifting his chin defiantly. "You've just called me a liar, and a plagiarist. Pardon me for being surprised that you'd trust someone like me

with a job like this," he said daringly, and clenched his teeth as JC narrowed his eyes on him.

"Oh, but you're wrong," JC said silkily. "I can actually respect someone who works situations like this to his own career advantage. Especially if he has the skills to back up his lies." He hesitated a beat, his eyes sharp as lasers. "It's just in my personal life that I prefer not to have liars and cheats around me."

Justin's throat went completely dry, and when JC cut his eyes meaningfully at the door, he turned and exited the office.

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Justin dragged himself slowly up the stairs to his apartment, head down and his steps lagging with exhaustion. He fumbled with his keys for a moment before getting the locks to turn, and shut the door behind him with a sigh of relief.

It was well after ten and his apartment was in complete darkness except for the dim light reflecting from the street lamps through his open blinds. It smelled dusty and musty and closed up, he thought as he let his messenger bag drop to the floor and tiredly shrugged out of his jacket. The echoing silence depressed him; it felt like nobody lived here anymore.

It had been almost two weeks since Joey's firing, and every single day seemed to have been longer and harder than the one before it. Each day he'd gone in to the office earlier and stayed later, thinking he could get a handle on the work load, that an extra couple of hours could make a difference. And each day it seemed that he fell further behind.

Justin gazed blankly around his living room and rubbed his forehead. He couldn't even remember what day it was. He was physically exhausted, mentally drained and right now he was starving. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a real meal but it hadn't been today, or yesterday either. He looked doubtfully across the room at his kitchen -- anything in his refrigerator had probably spoiled but he didn't have it in him to go back out and get food. All he wanted to do was fall into his bed -- his big, empty bed -- and sleep. Preferably without those painful dreams he'd been having lately, the ones where he woke up gasping JC's name.

He felt a dull surge of anger at the thought of JC but it was almost buried beneath his weariness. He did not need to think about JC right now, he reminded himself firmly for what felt like the thousandth time in the last two weeks. He did not have the mental or emotional reserves to deal with thoughts of JC, especially in his current sleep-deprived and stressed-out state.

Sleep. Justin turned away from his kitchen and took a slow step toward his bedroom. Yes, sleep. He needed to sleep, he thought dully, because tomorrow he had to get up early and do it all over again.

Justin paused as he caught sight of the dry and drooping plants on the bookcase shelf. He'd forgotten to water them, and he was usually so diligent about that. He looked around his usually cheerful apartment with new eyes, seeing the thin coat of dust on the furniture, the stack of unopened mail on the table by the door, his running shoes in front of the couch from

when he'd last jogged in the park, the Sunday morning before the day of the nightmare meeting about the five year plan.

That was the last day JC had been here, laughing as he'd kicked out of his own shoes before he pulled Justin close and stripped him out of his smelly jogging clothes, wrinkling his nose and pulling him toward the shower with a sweet grin that had promised all sorts of delightful things. Almost against his will Justin remembered the way they'd pressed together in Justin's inadequate shower stall, the sight of the water cascading down the smooth skin of JC's shoulder and way his hoarse whispers were almost lost in the loud hiss of the hot water . . .

Justin groaned, the sound unexpectedly loud in the oppressive silence of his apartment. For the thousandth time he tiredly reminded himself that he was not going to think about JC, that he was angry at JC, that it was JC who was making his work life a living hell. Then he trudged into the kitchen to get some water for his plants.

His intercom buzzed suddenly and harshly, and he bobbled the full watering pot in his surprise. The memory of JC's presence here was too fresh in his mind and Justin froze, torn between anticipation and terror and refusing to even acknowledge the hope that rooted him to his kitchen floor. The buzzer rang again, impatiently, and Justin sprang to press the button.

"Ye . . ." he cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"Justin, it's me," came Lance's deep voice, and Justin slumped against the wall, breathless with relief. Or disappointment. He pressed the button that would allow Lance to enter the building and unlocked his door, waiting in the doorway for Lance to appear.

Lance reached the top of the stairs and waved a hand in greeting, and Justin's eyebrows rose in mild surprise at his attire. "You're going out?" he asked curiously, and Lance gave him a speculative look as he entered the doorway.

"I am," he said, and looked carefully around the room as Justin closed the door behind him. "Or, I was." He turned to look sharply at Justin.

Justin's forehead knotted. "It's Friday already," he guessed, and Lance nodded. "Did we have plans?"

"No," Lance said slowly. "But I haven't been able to reach you, and I thought I should stop by to make sure that you weren't -- well, you know. Dead."

Justin winced, remembering the many messages Lance had left on his cell phone. "Yeah, I'm really sorry about that," he said, passing Lance to go water his plants. "I got your messages and I kept meaning to call you back. I've just been really swamped at work."

"Did you just get home? Geez, this place smells like you haven't been here in a month," Lance said, looking around with a frown. "What's going on? It's a little early for you to be moving in with your boyfriend . . ." he trailed off as Justin snorted and turned his back on him, moving across the room to water the plants.

Lance watched him in silence, then shrugged out of his jacket and leaned against the counter. "Okay. Justin, those plants are dead. And how about you tell me what's going on with work?"

Justin stood up, looking sadly at his forlorn plants. "No, dude, I think they're going to be okay. They just need water."

Lance was staring at him, and he shrugged and turned his back. He didn't want to talk about work, about the tension that was always, always singing through his veins, about the nauseating panic that made him unable to choke down food. He didn't want to talk about all the neglected and abandoned manuscripts that he'd found littering Joey's messy office, or about the dozens of emails from authors that Joey had left unanswered. And he really didn't want to talk about the phone calls he'd been getting from many of Joey's authors, severing their relationships with the press.

Justin sighed heavily, setting down the watering pot and collapsing into a chair. He also didn't want to talk about how JC required daily, detailed reports from him about the status of the music department, or the fact that he wanted them by e-mail rather than in person because he still, apparently, couldn't bear the sight of Justin. He didn't want to talk about how the accidental sight of JC across the hall or in the conference room still made his heart leap with an intense joy that shamed him, even as his stomach tensed and burned. He didn't want to talk about how, despite his rage over Joey's firing, he still lusted after his boss. He didn't even want to think about it.

He raised his eyes to Lance's, aware that the silence had grown thick and Lance's eyes were wide with concern. "Well, I got a promotion," he said with a wan smile.

Lance blinked, taking in Justin's slumped posture, his pale face and the black circles under his eyes. "Obviously career success agrees with you," Lance dead panned. His smile faded as Justin winced and covered his eyes with his hand. "Oh. Well. Congratulations?" he offered tentatively, and Justin grunted.

"Yeah, kind of. I mean, thanks." He sighed, letting his head roll against the head rest. "Well, it's not a good thing, exactly," he started. "See, Joey got fired."

"Oh god," Lance commented quietly. "JC finally fired him?"

"Yeah," Justin said dully. It felt so good to sit and do nothing. "So I'm kind of trying to do it all myself right now, and it's, um. Well. A lot harder than I ever thought it could be."

Lance watched him carefully. "So, you're having to do your own job as well as your manager's job?" he asked cautiously. "That's not right. I mean, you're only one person."

"Yeah," Justin said, and sighed. "Well, it's not actually that bad. I mean, we already had list setting so it could be a lot worse, I guess." He closed his eyes, feeling exhaustion roll over him in thick waves. "If things weren't in such . . . disarray, it might even be okay."

"Disarray?" Lance asked quietly, and Justin nodded.

"Yeah, things in Joey's office were, well. I think he'd been having a rough time for awhile, and I know he was under a lot of pressure, but apparently he was . . ." Justin trailed off and made a conscious effort to unclench his fists. "He was behind in a lot of things," he finished.

"Did you know that JC was going to fire him?" Lance asked and Justin sat up, a dull rage flooding him.

"No, I didn't know. Well, why should he tell me ahead of time?" he asked sharply. "Why should he show me any preferential treatment?"

"Whoa," Lance held up his hands, eyes wide. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean anything by that."

Justin stared at him for a moment, and then slumped back into his chair. "No, I'm sorry, Lance," he said tiredly. "I'm sorry. I'm just really, really tired, and Joey's firing was pretty fucked up."

"Well, that makes sense. I mean, I know you guys are good friends."

Justin shrugged again. "Well, we were. I mean, I thought we were." He stared at wall, trying not to get angry again. "Guess I was wrong about that."

"Jesus, Justin." Lance frowned at him. "What happened?"

"You know what? I don't want to talk about it, man. I really don't."

Lance stared at him for a moment, then sat up and clapped his hands together, making Justin jump. "Okay," he said. "Let's talk about something else. Like, when's the last time you ate?"

Justin blinked. "Dude, I don't even know."

"Well, why don't you change your clothes and we'll go out and get something," Lance suggested. "Take your mind off stuff."

Justin shook his head tiredly. "Honestly, man, I don't even have the energy. But don't let me hold you up, you go. You look great, you should go out and have a good time."

"You have to eat, Justin," Lance said seriously. "You have to feed the machine. You're not going to be able to work at this pace if you don't take care of yourself."

"Yeah, yeah," Justin said, already feeling his eyes slipping closed again. "I'll get something later. It's okay."

He heard Lance sigh as he went to the kitchen, pulling open a drawer to get the phone book. "Does that Chinese place down the street deliver?" he asked, and Justin smiled as he leaned back and closed his eyes. Lance was such a good friend.

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Justin didn't even hear the buzzer when the food was delivered, didn't wake up until Lance poked him hard in the shoulder with a chopstick. "Chow time," he said cheerfully and Justin

dragged himself out of his chair to blink at the row of take-out containers on the living room table.

The smell of food made his stomach howl and he grabbed the container closest to him, not even caring what it was. "Thanks, man," he said gratefully, opening the lid and attacking the mandarin beef like a starving man.

Lance watched him silently. "Jesus," he said with disgust. "You want me to mash it up and put it in a syringe? That way you can just mainline it." Justin, his mouth full, gave him a quick middle finger and Lance laughed. "At least use a plate."

They settled down on the floor of Justin's living room and spread the containers out on the table. As Justin ate hungrily Lance talked quietly about his own job and gave him some news about mutual friends. He waited until Justin slowed down a little before starting to ask questions.

"So, are they going to hire someone to replace you? Or to replace Joey?" he asked casually. "Because you can't keep this up forever."

"No, no, I know that," Justin said slowly. "To tell you the truth, I don't know what's going to happen."

Lance watched him carefully. "Well, what does JC say?"

"JC doesn't say much," Justin said resentfully. "I get e-mails wanting to know where this report is, where that report is, when's the last time I talked to this author, what's the status of this manuscript, and he wants it all right the fuck now. But if I write back and ask a question like what's going to happen next, he ignores me."

"Well, that sucks," Lance said noncommittally. "Sounds like he's busy too."

"Whatever," Justin muttered, and concentrated on his food.

"Okay, so it sounds like the honeymoon's over," Lance said. He was frowning into the container of Szechwan chicken, so he didn't see Justin freeze in mid-chew as his throat closed up.

Justin swallowed past the lump of mingled pain and fury, and took a deep breath. "Well," he started. "I'm actually pretty pissed at JC," he said slowly.

Lance glanced up at him. "No kidding," he said mildly. "Why, because he fired your friend?"

Justin nodded. "Yeah. Actually, no," he said, loading his plate with more food. "I guess I'm mad because of the way he did it."

"So, you didn't think that Joey deserved to be fired?"

Justin dug grimly into his food, his mind on the overwhelming mess of unfinished work in Joey's office. "Well, I guess I can't really say that," he said slowly. "You know what? I don't want to talk about this."

Lance nodded agreeably. "I don't blame you," he said. "It must suck to get caught between your friend and your secret boyfriend like that."

"All right, he's not my boyfriend," Justin flared. "You were right; I was stupid to get mixed up with him in the first place, he's every bit the cold, rotten bastard you always said he was, and it was a big fat fucking mistake . . ."

"Whoa," Lance said again, blinking as Justin trailed off.

Justin rubbed his forehead, feeling exhaustion drag heavily at his limbs. Thinking about JC gave him a headache. "God, Lance. I'm sorry," he said tiredly. "Seriously. It's just," he paused and sighed deeply. "Things have been pretty rough, I guess."

"I can see that," Lance said slowly. He nudged the last container of food in Justin's direction.

Justin took it and emptied it out on his plate, a full container of steaming vegetables and fried rice. "Okay," he started. "What happened was that JC asked Joey to do a five year plan for the department . . ."

Lance listened quietly and offered no comment as Justin told him about the plan, the lies, and that final, horrifying meeting. "The thing is," Justin finished as he scraped the last of the food off his plate, "neither of them ever gave the other a chance. They were at each others' throats from the very beginning, and I just got caught in the middle. Now JC thinks I'm a liar and a plagiarist, and Joey . . ." He trailed off, trying to forget the vicious things Joey had said to him on that last day. "I guess he thinks I sabotaged him, to get his job. Or conspired with JC to get him fired."

"Well, that sucks," Lance said, and Justin nodded unhappily. "Have you talked to Joey since then?"

Justin kept his eyes down. "I called him once, and e-mailed him a couple of times," he said quietly. "But he hasn't responded."

"Oh. Well, maybe he's just out of town, or busy. Or something."

Justin shook his head. "Or something," he repeated grimly, feeling a sudden and unwelcome flare of tension as he remembered the chilly voice mail message he'd received that afternoon from one of Joey's more successful authors. Justin had the distinct feeling that Joey was busily spreading the news of his change in employment status.

Lance's eyes were sympathetic. "I'm sorry Justin. I'm sure once Joey cools down he'll realize that getting fired wasn't your fault. I mean, he was your boss, and you just did what he asked you to do, right?"

"Right," Justin said without conviction.

"And it's not like Joey knew that you were sleeping with the director, right?"

Justin's face burned. "Fuck, I hope not," he muttered. He couldn't meet Lance's eyes.

"And look at the bright side," Lance continued after a small silence. "Now you have a plan in place for your department that you believe in, and that you think is viable. Right?"

Justin glanced up at him, his brow furrowing. "I guess," he said slowly. "I mean, I was more interested in helping Joey out of his bind, but yeah, I did work hard on it."

"And I know your goal was to make department manager within two years, so that's good. I mean, you're acting manager now, right? You're actually ahead of schedule there."

"Yeah," Justin said without enthusiasm.

"And if you had to make some, uh, personal sacrifices along the way, well," Lance shrugged. "That's the way it goes sometimes. Right?"

Again Justin felt that dull surge of tangled anger and despair that he felt every time he thought of JC, and he narrowed his eyes at Lance.

"You think I did it on purpose too," he accused flatly.

Lance leaned forward and shook his head, he green eyes sympathetic. "No, Justin. I know you way better than that," he said quietly. "I'm just pointing out how it could look to someone who hasn't known you for years and years."

Justin digested that in silence. "Whatever," he said curtly, gathering up the dirty plates. "I really don't want to talk about it, and I don't have the time or energy to even think about it, much less talk about it. So, you know."

"No problem. We won't talk about it, then," Lance said agreeably, and he rose to help Justin clear the table.

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JC stretched and tried not to yawn as his meeting with the art department came to an end, and then patiently waited as Chris's department filed out. Despite the fact that Chris had been calling and e-mailing him regularly, JC had gone several days in a row without talking to him, and if he wanted to preserve their friendship, JC knew he was going to have to make some sort of peace offering.

Fortunately for JC, Chris didn't seem inclined to make this more difficult than it had to be: instead of castigating JC, as he surely would have done at any other time, Chris for once sat still, scribbling notes and impatiently running his fingers through his hair, causing it to stick up even more. JC leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and watched.

"So yeah. You were probably right about the Whittinger cover," Chris said in a low, even voice, and JC raised his eyebrows in surprise. Given the heated discussion they'd just had about it, he hadn't expected Chris to capitulate so easily.

"I probably won't use that designer again," Chris said. "Especially since we'll be doing a lot more work in house in the future."

JC nodded. That was what he wanted -- that was why he'd let Chris hire this fancy group of Parsons School graduates to begin with. God, he should really say something to Chris, should try to make amends or offer some sort of explanation for his behavior as of late, but try as he might, JC just couldn't summon up either the words or the enthusiasm to do so. That had been happening to him a lot these past few days.

Chris finished writing, carelessly tossed his pen to the side, then looked JC in the eye. "It's 5:30 and you look like shit. Let's go get a drink."

JC considered it. It might actually be exactly the thing to do: it wasn't like he was suddenly going to become effective this afternoon, and a gesture like this could go a good way toward mitigating the anger in Chris's eyes.

"Yeah, let's," he told Chris, and managed a smile when Chris snapped, "Well I'll be goddamned. He condescends to hang out with me again."

"I don't mean to ignore you, Chris -- it's just that these past few days have been --" JC began, then quickly stopped himself. "Okay. Let me go check on something in my office and I'll meet you in the lobby in ten."

Chris nodded, then looked carefully at him, speaking with almost studied casualness. "I've actually got to go ask Justin something quick, so I'll get him to come along too, okay?"

JC stood up much more quickly than he meant to, automatically shaking his head, feeling his chest constrict and his gut start to tense as it all came back again, all the anger and the confusion and the pain, and he was absolutely not, absolutely not going to drink with Justin Timberlake tonight.

"Know what?" he said, not caring if his voice was too high, not caring if he was speaking too quickly, not caring if he couldn't stop from picking at the edge of his jacket. "Just go with Justin. I'm -- I've got some stuff to do anyway, and I should really --"

"Okay, okay, so I won't ask him. I won't talk to him at all, in fact. It'll be just you and me." Chris's voice was calm and reassuring, and JC sighed inwardly. He must really look like a freak. "But you're not getting out of this, not now, okay?"

Was his face growing red? JC longed to touch his cheek to check, but showing such weakness in front of Chris was out of the question.

"All right," he said, his voice dull even to his own ears. "The lobby, ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," Chris repeated, and JC walked out of the room.

The "thing" JC actually had to check on was whether Justin was still in his office. In the two or so weeks since JC had fired Joey, they hadn't spoken to each other at all outside of barely civil, extremely controlled conversations about work, and when they had those conversations JC was usually too overwrought to really look at him, to really see how he was. He was still angry at Justin, and even now it boiled up in him: how dared Justin have spoken to him that way, and how dared he accuse him of unfairness? And further still, how on earth could he

have lied like that, again and again and again over the course of days -- lied like that to JC's face, lied consistently and shamelessly and . . . JC clenched his fists and tried to breathe easily, but it was impossible because he was suddenly furious all over again.

But despite all the anger, a part of JC stubbornly insisted on this, insisted that he walk by Justin's office to ascertain whether he was tired today, if he was still so tense, if he still had that furious, pained look in his eyes. JC had been driving him very, very, hard, but he refused to feel too guilty about it. In the end, Justin had gotten exactly what he'd wanted, however unconsciously, and JC was going to make sure he remembered it every single minute of every single day.

As he approached Justin's open door, JC held his breath and felt his heart begin to pound. It was humiliating to be drawn here, to be sure, but not embarrassing enough that he wasn't going to do it, and so for as long as he could without being noticed, JC gazed into Justin's office, caught him standing pensively in front of the small, useless window on the far wall of his office, his shoulders obviously tense under his shirt, his head bent ever so slightly. And oh, his body -- but JC wasn't looking at that, not at all. JC was simply here to assess Justin's mental state, and now he had an answer: tired and tense at the end of a long day, very much like JC himself.

JC hurried past the open door, satisfied that he had not been seen, then went up the stairs and into his own office, turning off his computer and flicking off the lights before heading down to the lobby.

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Chris was either a lot dumber or a lot smarter than JC thought he was -- instead of pestering JC with questions or annoying him with accusations, he simply sat with him and talked of innocuous things as JC slowly drank himself into oblivion. It took about half an hour for JC to get where he was hoping to go -- a pleasant, numb, hazy place -- and when he finally arrived, he felt a vast and overwhelming sense of relief. At last, his mind was quiet; at last, he could stop being so angry, so hurt, so very stupidly upset. JC gripped the glass in front of him, carefully turned his head toward Chris, and smiled.

"What?" Chris asked, smiling back.

"Nothing, nothing. It's just -- this is really good scotch." JC drew a finger around the rim of his glass, dipped it lightly into the amber liquid, then slowly brought it into his mouth. For sheer sensual pleasure, fine alcohol was hard to beat.

Chris grinned. "I haven't seen you get drunk this fast since college."

JC laughed, and then winced a little, because already, the anxiety and the upset had started to chip away at the edges of his very fine buzz, and he most definitely did not want that to happen. Reaching in front of him for the bottle -- he had insisted that the bartender simply leave it there, carelessly waving a handful of bills in his face when he'd looked skeptical -- JC poured himself another drink and sighed.

"Scotch, neat," he sighed, and suddenly it seemed very, very profound and sad.

"JC --" Chris began, his voice uncertain.

"No, no, no," JC quickly said. "Not when you've been doing so well, Chris, please. Just -- don't, okay?"

Chris looked hard at him, and even through his drunkenness, JC could see the sharpness in his eyes, the keenness of his expression. So clearly, Chris was smarter than JC thought, because now that JC was struggling a little -- however inconspicuously -- to sit up straight, Chris looked is if he were going to start asking the really hard questions.

"Look. Obviously I'm not going to get anything out of you that you don't want to share --"

"No, you're not."

"I know that, okay? But my point is, look -- no one has any idea what exactly went on here, so if you want to talk about it, I'm here, okay?" Chris's voice was low, even, and steady, oddly comforting, and JC found himself leaning ever so slightly toward him.

"Really, there's not a hell of a lot to say." JC frowned, then looked blearily around the bar: dark wood, dark lighting, no televisions anywhere -- a fairly classy place, actually. It made him feel calm and at ease, as if the order and the quiet in here were a haven from the rest of the stupid, loud, stubborn, betraying, lying world.

"I've noticed, you know. You and Justin."

"Noticed what?" JC laughed, a short, ugly sound. "Noticed that he won't even look at me? Noticed that I can't stand to be in the same room with him for more then five seconds? There's a lot to notice, all right."

Chris brushed that off with a wave of his hand. "What I noticed was that the two of you -- well, for a while there, it looked like something pretty damn good was going on."

JC rolled his eyes. "He told you. That little asshole -- of course he told you, didn't he. And after we agreed that we weren't going to --"

"He didn't have to tell me, idiot." Chris's eyes had somehow broken through the protective haze of drunkenness JC had gathered around him, and they were clear and knowing. JC clenched his teeth to keep from reacting.

"I mean, it was probably more obvious to me because I know you so well, but anyone, JC, anyone who really studied you guys could have seen it, could have picked upon the --" Chris gestured helplessly for the word, then took a sip of his own drink. "You guys were just really, really happy, okay?"

"You know, of all the things I absolutely did not need to hear right now, that had to be at the very top of the list," JC bitterly told him. "Thanks for that."

Chris rolled his eyes. "What happened, JC? What on earth went on between you, Joey, and him? And why did you fire Joey?"

"It has to be my fault, of course," JC said flatly.

"Okay, so maybe it wasn't. I mean, one day Justin's in a fairly junior position, the next he's in charge of the department with his bothersome boss out of the way -- and maybe, maybe he's sleeping with the director as well, though I'm not saying anything for sure, I'm not insinuating that," Chris quickly finished as JC fixed him with a blistering glare.

"It's just that from a certain point of view, it looks like our Justin pulled off a pretty little power play."

"It's not Justin's fault." The words were out before JC could stop them. "He maybe -- he maybe wasn't the person I thought he was, but this isn't his fault. Joey -- well, whatever happened there was going to happen anyway at some point."

Chris sighed. "Well, is there anything you can do to fix this?"

"Nothing to fix," JC said shortly.

Chris shook his head in annoyance. "Well for one thing, you need to be fixed. I mean, look at you. You're walking around the office like a zombie -- and when you're not undead, we all wish you were, because you've been such a fucking asshole lately it's not even funny. And as if that's not enough, when you finally are with someone who knows you, someone you could maybe talk to, you clam up and go all distant and shit. Honestly, JC -- what'd you do, fail all the tests in Non-Self-Destructive Behavior 101?"

"I don't understand a fucking word you're saying, and I'm glad for that," JC mumbled, then reached yet again for the bottle, only to stare, wide-eyed, at Chris when he took it away.

"You're drunk right now -- really drunk -- but I want you to concentrate for a minute, want you to stay with me, okay? Do you think you can do that?"

"What?" JC scowled at Chris.

"Do you think you can --"

"Stop talking to me like I'm an idiot!" JC said, wincing as he heard himself slurring his words. "Whatever you've gotta tell me, I'm, I'll hear it, okay?"

"Do you think that if you talked to Justin about what went wrong, all of this could be fixed? I know, I know, it's far, far more complicated than a lowly idiot like myself could ever hope to understand," Chris said in annoyance as JC furiously gestured while he spoke, "but seriously, JC -- why not take steps to make yourself less miserable?"

JC sighed and looked straight at Chris. "I ruined it and he ruined it and that's that. It's not fixable, and it's not going to go away," he said, then stepped carefully off his bar stool, looking away and blinking hard as misery suffused him. A moment later, there was a warm, strong hand on his arm -- Chris's hand -- and JC looked down at him in surprise.

"Let me get you a cab," Chris said, his voice sad or pitying or -- well, something horrible, but it was far too late now to try to block things out, so JC just sagged a little and nodded.

"Thanks, Chris," he managed to say as he got into the car, and for a moment Chris stared long and hard at him.

"Oh, JC," he murmured sadly, and then squeezed his arm one last time before closing the door and watching as the car drove off.

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Justin looked at his watch and tried not to fidget. It was 1 p.m., still too early to leave, and he didn't see how he was going to make it until 3, particularly given that he already couldn't concentrate. It wasn't every day that his mother showed up in town -- in fact, she hadn't been to the city since he'd moved there -- and Justin was almost pathetically eager to see her again, to hug her, to hear her fond, scratchy, gentle voice. A little comfort sounded really, really good right now, especially given that his life had suddenly imploded.

Or was it exploded, Justin wondered as he looked at his desk and felt the low-level panic that now always accompanied him start to ratchet up. Memos from JC, demands from JC, half-assembled lists, manuscripts to be looked at, and a small but growing pile of resumes from people who wanted to work for the music department: there was far too much to think about and far, far too little time.

And this was even before Justin factored in the conversation he'd had yesterday with JC in which JC had narrowed his eyes, tightened his mouth, and said, "I'm going to need your projections for the spring list by the end of next week."

Which -- that was a full three weeks early, and why was JC being so hard on him, so irrational, so inflexible? It was almost as if he was setting Justin up to fail, and that was pretty fucking cruel. Justin grimaced. He could hardly stand to see JC anymore, much less talk to him, and the fact that JC was the boss, that JC was in absolute control at work made things even more difficult.

Justin would dearly have loved to talk about this whole disaster with his mother, but the fact of the matter was that while he'd felt comfortable hinting that there was someone special in his life, someone who might possibly be the "real thing," he hadn't felt so good about letting his mother know that the someone special was his boss. It would only have made her worried and suspicious, and when his mother felt like that, she was unrelenting with questions and insinuations. Justin hadn't wanted to weather that -- and now that he and JC were over, his decision seemed in some ways even wiser. His mom could have nothing good to say about the way he and JC had conducted themselves, or about how they were conducting themselves right now, all sharp eyes and sharp remarks and long, cold stares.

Justin sighed. But it would have been nice to get sympathy, to hear her say, "Aw, baby. He wasn't good enough for you anyway." There was actually a chance he might still get that if he could come up with a way to talk about the JC debacle without revealing precisely who JC was.

And that was almost funny, because in some ways, not even Justin knew who JC really was. In annoyance, Justin grabbed a pen and started drawing heavy black lines through his ridiculously long to do list: so many things to accomplish, so many things he knew he was

never going to get done in time. As he worked, Justin tilted his head for just a second and listened carefully to a sound out in the hallway. It was almost as if he were hearing . . . but that made no sense. He checked his watch again: it was 1:30 now, and no. No, he could not be hearing what he thought he was hearing.

But a few moments later, it came again, this time from somewhere much closer, and Justin sat straight up in his chair, his eyes slowly widening in amazement. Yes. That was definitely his mother's laugh.

Before he really knew what he was doing, Justin was on his feet and striding down the hallway and toward the noise, which he was now pretty sure was coming from the kitchen. But it made no sense: even assuming she was here, how could that have happened?

Justin pushed open the door to the kitchen, then dragged in a slow, heavy breath as he saw not only his mother but also JC, caught the two of them sitting together, drinking tea, and talking companionably.

"Mama, what is this?" Justin blurted out, aggrieved, before he could catch himself, then flushed as he watched JC's eyebrows raise in amusement.

"Justin!" Lynn said happily, then bounded out of her chair and into his arms. Justin wrapped her in his arms and squeezed, closing his eyes slightly and relishing the scent of her perfume.

"But how?" he asked when he finally let her go. "It's not even three yet!"

"Opening on an earlier flight," Lynn said. "And then when I got here, I thought I'd come over and surprise you, but frankly, I had no idea how big and confusing this place would be. Thank god for JC."

"Oh yes. Thank god for JC," Justin repeated just a bit acidly, and watched JC smirk.

"There I was, Justin, confused as could be in your big fancy lobby, and JC came right up to me and spoke kindly, found a place for me to put my luggage, and then gave me a tour of the whole place," Lynn said brightly. "And since you were in a meeting at the time, when we weren't talking about marketing departments and artwork, he filled me in on you."

"Me?" Justin anxiously asked, and then thought, meeting? because he had definitely not been in one. What on god's earth had JC been doing -- what had been his motivation in keeping Justin's mother to himself? Justin stared hard at JC, trying and failing to get a read on his thoughts, because as always, JC was maddeningly inscrutable.

"Yes! And baby -- how could you not tell me about your big promotion?" Lynn asked, and Justin felt his heart stop beating. "JC says you worked really hard for it."

For a long moment, Justin simply let himself glare at JC, let him see all the resentment and fury he could summon. JC met his eyes steadily, but he did start fidgeting a bit with his tea bag, so Justin figured maybe some of what he was trying to communicate had gotten through.

"Yes, well, we have a lot to talk about," Justin said to his mother, then hugged her again.

"He says you're even getting a new office," Lynn gushed, and yet again Justin looked daggers at JC. "Maybe I can help you start decorating it, hmm?"

"Gosh. Yeah. Maybe," Justin said tightly, and then shut up because he was afraid of what he might say next.

"JC, thank you so much," Lynn gratefully said, and JC gave her an easy, devastating smile: appreciative but not sexual, warm but not cloying, kind but not sappy. Justin hated him for being able to do that, hated him for so effortlessly charming the one person he really, really needed on his side right now.

"It was my pleasure," JC said smoothly, and Justin's mother actually giggled. Justin gave up and just rolled his eyes, and when JC saw that, his smile deepened.

"You know, there has to be a way I can thank you," Lynn said. "I mean, since you said so many nice things about my son today."

JC's smile got a little less relaxed. "Oh no. I said those things because I meant them," he said, looking carefully at Lynn and ignoring Justin altogether. "Phoenix Press is lucky to have Justin: he's a clever, smart, ambitious editor, and if he keeps up with the good work he's been doing, he's going to go far."

Justin smiled weakly at his beaming mother, then said, "It's been such a . . . learning experience to work for JC, Mama."

"I'm sure it has," Lynn said, fondly placing a hand on JC's arm, and Justin bristled as JC smiled down at her. How could she not see?

"I know! How about I cook you a real Southern dinner?" Lynn went on, her smile broadening even as Justin said, "Oh Mama, no. JC doesn't -- that's not at all his kind of food, and --"

"Not my kind of food?" JC said lightly, and raised his eyebrows. "Not to be rude, Justin, but how would you know?"

"Exactly!" Lynn said, her enthusiasm apparently blinding her to the intensity of the gaze Justin and JC were sharing, or the way her son's body had tensed in response to JC's remark.

"You're right, you're right," Justin quickly finished, then turned to his mother. "Nobody really knows JC," he said in a conversational tone. "That's how he likes it."

JC smiled slightly and didn't respond to that, and for the umpteenth time that week alone, Justin fought the urge to lash out at him, to try to hurt him, to do anything in his power to disturb his deeply annoying composure.

"So how about tomorrow?" Lynn suggested. "Fried chicken, some greens, cornbread . . . you'd love it, JC, I absolutely promise you."

JC gave Justin's mother another devastating smile and then said, "Tell you what. I'll check my calendar and then get back to Justin about this tomorrow, all right?"

"All right, but I hope you know this doesn't mean you're off the hook," Lynn said, threatening, and JC actually laughed then, laughed affectionately and kindly and then looked fondly down at his mother.

"Truly, it's been a pleasure meeting you," he said to her.

Lynn smiled, then stepped forward to hug him, and Justin froze then, fists clenched and eyes wide as he waited to see what JC -- JC, who hated superficial touching and who abhorred inappropriate informality -- would do.

But JC just laughed again, and suddenly his arms were around Lynn, pulling her close. It was a real hug, a genuine one, and for a horrible, insane second Justin felt a strange surge of jealousy -- jealousy of his mother, and that was just beyond the pale. Shaking his head to clear it of the unpleasant thoughts, Justin looked resolutely at the floor until he felt more composed.

"Bye now," Lynn beamed.

"Bye," JC said to her, and then carefully killed his smile and looked coolly at Justin. "Feel free to take the rest of the day off," he told him, and then nodded briefly and left the room.

"You're lucky, Justin," Lynn said seriously, gesturing for Justin to sit down next to her as she finished her tea. "Not everyone has such a kind, supportive boss."

"Yeah," Justin said, and held back a heavy sigh. He and his mother were going to have to have a long talk tonight.

"Do you . . . find him attractive at all?" Lynn quietly asked, and Justin only just stopped himself from starting in his seat.

"I don't know," he said, trying to infuse his voice with annoyance. "I never thought about it."

"Hmm." Lynn smiled to herself, then reached out and took Justin's hand in hers. "He looks at you, Justin. Really looks at you. Even in just the few moments we were all here, I noticed it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Justin flatly said. "It's not -- no. Really, Mama. There's nothing there."

"Such a handsome man," Lynn teased. "Those blue eyes, those curls . . . "

"Stop it!" Justin hissed, looking anxiously around the room lest someone overhear them, and his mother laughed in delight.

"All right, all right. I'll let it go for now. But really, baby -- he looked. He absolutely, definitely looked."

"Yeah. Okay," Justin tiredly said, and then patiently waited for his mother to finish her tea so he could show her to his office.

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Really, he deserved it, JC thought to himself as he stared blankly at his computer monitor and felt his face burning. This sort of misery was perfectly reasonable payback for eavesdropping, and he had been eavesdropping -- there was no way around it.

But it hadn't been intentional -- in fact, JC hadn't planned to see Justin at all today, so it had been sheerest coincidence that he'd ended up only a few people back from Justin in the line at the deli. JC had actually almost walked out altogether upon first seeing him, until, that is, Justin had seen him as well and given him a cold little nod of the head. After that point JC had been locked into staying, because there was no way in the world JC was going to give Justin the satisfaction of realizing that he'd upset him. Not if he could help it.

Since JC was behind Justin, he could watch him without being seen himself, which was both gratifying and instructive. Justin was lightly rocking back and forth on his feet as he waited, his shoulders hunched and his head down. He'd been looking preoccupied and drawn for weeks now and JC felt a flash of guilt as he remembered the dull, miserable look that had been in his eyes when they'd first seen each other. In part, that look was JC's fault, because he had been putting a lot of pressure on Justin, giving him extra assignments, deadlines, and just in general getting in his face about a lot of things as he tried to ease into his interim position as head of the music department. It wasn't that he was being especially harsh on Justin, wasn't as if he were taking pleasure in keeping such a close watch on him, JC quickly told himself. No, he was simply trying to smooth over a personnel crisis for a department that had unexpectedly become understaffed.

But still, maybe he needed to go a little bit easier on Justin, needed to give him room either to succeed or to fail instead of ushering him relentlessly in the direction JC wanted him to go. Because truly, Justin did look unhappy.

But maybe Justin deserved to be unhappy, JC suddenly, fiercely, thought, and just like that he was in the grip of anger all over again, was thrown right into the middle of all the hurt and the confusion he'd been trying so desperately to ignore. Justin had deceived him systematically and with intent; Justin had lied to his face over a series of days and had conspired with Joey -- Joey Fatone, of all people -- to fool JC. In short, Justin had placed his relationship with Joey over his relationship with JC -- and that probably hurt more than anything else. He was deeply untrustworthy; he was caught up in an ambition he wasn't even fully aware of and he was willing to lie and use people on his way to getting what he wanted. It was deeply reprehensible, and no. No. Justin didn't deserve better behavior from JC at this point.

JC's thoughts on this had been interrupted by the ringing of Justin's phone, and despite the emotional turmoil he'd suddenly plunged into, JC couldn't help but smile faintly as he watched Justin grope clumsily in his coat pocket for it, nor could he help, well, hearing a little bit of what Justin was saying as he took the call. That definitely wasn't his fault. If Justin was going to have conversations on his cell phone in such public places, than Justin was going to have to expect that other people would hear them.

"No, she's great, got back to Tennessee about a week ago now. And yeah, it was really wonderful, so cool to have her here," Justin said, and JC frowned a little. He'd really liked Justin's mother, and a part of him wished that he'd actually taken her up on her dinner

invitation, no matter how uncomfortable it would have made Justin -- or, rather, precisely because it would have made Justin uncomfortable. But it was too late for that now.

Once Justin moved away from discussing his mother, his conversation had become rote and boring -- something about the weather, something about the amount of work he had to do -- and so JC had gradually stopped caring about that and instead gotten preoccupied with the way Justin's hair curled at the nape of his neck and the way the back of his neck looked so vulnerable when he had it cut so short. Justin had used to shiver in pleasure when JC had kissed him there, had used to shiver in pleasure at so many things --

Almost as if in response to JC's thoughts, Justin's voice had just then taken on a certain timbre, low and sexy, and for an electric, stunned moment, JC, who had grown accustomed to believing that that voice was exclusively for him, had immediately dragged eyes from Justin's neck to his mouth, looking sharply and inquisitively at him.

But Justin hadn't been talking to him. It was some sort of teasing conversation, something playful and full of innuendo, and JC had to lower his head and closed his eyes partway as he heard Justin murmur, "Well, then -- you'll just have to come show me, now won't you?"

Nausea and rage roiled in JC and he desperately wanted to stop listening, to let this go and be an adult about it, because certainly Justin would have wanted to move on; certainly Justin would have wanted to get on his with life. It was perfectly understandable -- even if it seemed, to JC, horribly, cruelly early to do so. But he had to let Justin go -- because for god's sake, hadn't he been the one to push him away? So really, what he'd needed to do was to ignore this conversation outright.

That had been impossible, however, because another part of JC was listening cannily, intently for clues -- a name, an endearment, a mention of a specific place, anything really, because if there were any way he could find out who this person was, then he could -- he could --

He could ruin things for Justin, could break them up, and JC had flushed in shame even as he'd thought it, because it was true -- that was absolutely what he wanted to do, and the fact that he could even condescend to indulge in such pathetic fantasies meant that he was nowhere near being over Justin, certainly not as far as he'd thought he'd been.

"Okay. Okay, baby." Justin's voice seemed ridiculously loud, and for a moment JC had gazed in amazement at the other customers in line, wondering how everyone else was reacting to the Justin Timberlake Phone Sex show. None of them seemed the slightest bit interested or shocked, though, which probably meant that JC was the only one focusing on it, the only one straining to hear.

"Tonight, then. Yeah. What? Of course my place," Justin had said. "I've -- well. I've just been looking forward to this a lot, okay? All right. Okay. Bye."

After he'd hung up, Justin had slowly looked over to meet JC's eyes, had had the fucking nerve to look at him through his goddamned eyelashes, and JC had felt himself flush in shame, because he hadn't been able to look away, hadn't been able to in any way, shape, or form conceal the fact that he'd been listening in. And after he'd done that, caught JC acting

like a fool, Justin had humiliated him further by giving him a small, satisfied smile before slowly turning away again.

That, JC realized now as he stared again at his monitor, had been the clincher. Difficult as it was, he supposed he could take the fact that Justin was moving on, that Justin was starting to get over things. What he could not take, however, was taunting. He would not stand for that.

JC sighed and checked his e-mail, then groaned when he saw a message from Fritz Lanning, one of Phoenix's more needy authors as well as one of its most important ones. What this meant, of course, was that it was impossible to ignore his theatrics and his demands, and JC grimaced as he noted the attachment to the message -- it was the first few chapters of a new book, and Fritz would expect a response to them soon, was accustomed, in fact, to a twenty-four-hour window of response. The previous director had spoiled him rotten.

JC unhappily clicked on the attachment, preparing to scan the first of the chapters, and then turned sideways when his cell phone, in his jacket across the room, rang. Stumbling to his feet, which was unlike him and made him scowl even more, JC hurried to get it, and then sighed in impatience as he saw that the call was from Bobbie Thomas.

They were going to the breast cancer fund-raiser tonight, which his mother had organized and which Bobbie had helped her with, so JC supposed it wasn't totally inappropriate for her to be calling. He took a deep breath, tried to clear his mind of negativity, and answered the phone.

As it turned out, the call brought good news: Bobbie was going to be busy with preparations right up until the beginning of the gala, so she suggested that the two of them skip the dinner they'd planned and that she meet him at the press to take him to the party from there instead of JC traveling out to her apartment to pick her up. JC had a tuxedo and shoes in the closet to his office, something he kept for exactly this sort of situation, and so it all worked out beautifully and he got off the phone feeling slightly better about the rest of the evening. Of course, fund-raisers were destined to be boring and soul-numbing, but there really were better and worse ways to go about it, and not having to sit through a dinner with Bobbie beforehand was definitely on the better side of things.

JC returned to his computer feeling more energized than before and peered at the attachment he'd just opened. Interesting -- very interesting. The new book Fritz Lanning was proposing seemed to be about . . . jazz.

JC's hand was on the phone even before the evil smile had finished spreading across his face.

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Bobbie showed up on time for once, which was one pleasant surprise, and she looked sexy and confident, which was another. When she slid out of her fur coat, JC let his eyes linger on the shockingly low neckline of her dress, then slowly moved to her and kissed the soft skin of her neck, sliding a finger under one of the thin spaghetti straps that were somehow holding the whole damn thing up.

"Nice," he said appreciatively, and enjoyed feeling her breathing quicken in response as he followed the strap down and over to the full curve of her breasts.

Maybe Justin had it right. Maybe it really was time to move on.

"Mm, thanks," Bobbie said rather distantly, all business, and then gently grabbed him by the wrist and removed his hand -- and JC understood that, he really did. This was a big night for her, and in the past, his own behavior toward her had been, well, rather appalling in its inconsistency. But she looked good tonight, she really did.

"All right, so let's get going," he said, smiling to show her that there were no hurt feelings. She smiled back at him and then followed him out of the office.

"Wait, wait," Bobbie said as he lead her to the spiral staircase to the floor below instead of the elevator that would take them straight down to the parking garage. "This isn't the way, is it?"

"There's someone here I need to say goodbye to," JC said lightly, and gestured at the staircase, waiting for her to start descending it. It couldn't have been easy given the tightness of her dress and the height of her heels but Bobbie was a trooper, and soon enough they were both in the editorial wing. Placing a hand in the small of Bobbie's back, JC led her to the glow of light that was emanating from Justin's office, then knocked casually on the door jamb before ushering her in.

Justin was slumped at his desk, blearily staring at the screen, his tie undone, his hair a mess, and his shirt rumpled. He looked exhausted and frustrated, which was exactly how he'd sounded on the phone when JC had informed him that he absolutely had to stay late tonight to assess the Lanning chapters.

"So how's it going?" JC asked jovially, and took deep, uncomplicated pleasure in the way Justin's eyes shot immediately to Bobbie, the way they quickly and unhappily looked her up and down.

"It's . . . interesting," Justin said flatly, then looked straight at JC, and oh yes, he was angry -- he was definitely angry, and maybe a little hurt, too, though if he was, he was hiding it well. It was with some effort that JC kept himself from smirking.

"Good, good. So you'll have that report for me tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow," Justin said, and then took his eyes away from JC altogether and stood up to smile at Bobbie. "Hi -- I'm Justin," he said, his voice suddenly open and kind, and JC was forced to regroup.

"Justin Timberlake, meet Bobbie Thomas," he said, watching carefully as Justin gave Bobbie a full-out charming smile and as Bobbie responded as anyone who received such a smile would -- with a faint flush and a grin of her own.

"You look lovely tonight," Justin gallantly said, and as Bobbie thanked him, JC realized with some embarrassment that he hadn't said anything of the kind himself, had just moved in and started to paw at her. He was going to have to be much, much better to her.

"We'd better get going, okay?" he gently said right now, and Bobbie nodded faintly at him.

"I hope you won't have to be here too late," she told Justin, her voice full of sympathy. "No one should have to spend all night in the office."

"No, they shouldn't," Justin said, giving JC a very significant look, and then returned his gaze to her. "But once I'm out of here, I've got plans of my own, so things aren't looking too bad."

"The report Justin, yes?" JC reminded him, taking care to infuse his voice with just a hint of warning. If Justin read carefully, as JC knew he did, and if Justin had to write a report on top of that, it was very unlikely that he'd make it out of here before 11:00.

"Yes, JC, the report," Justin said, for the first time allowing venom and belligerence to infuse his voice. "I'll have it done, so don't worry about it."

"Great, then," JC said and gave him a huge, fake smile before placing a hand in the small of Bobbie's back and gently pressuring her to turn and leave. She gave him a quick, curious look but took the suggestion.

"It was nice to meet you, Bobbie," Justin said, and Bobbie paused for a moment to return the compliment before heading out again. As she did so, JC was careful to slowly, obviously slide the hand on her back a little bit lower -- nothing too far, but clearly an intimate touch, something he wouldn't have done with just any date.

"Bye Justin," he said without turning around, his voice full of satisfaction, and held back a chuckle when he heard Justin grudgingly mutter, "Bye, JC. Good night."

October

October

Justin bit his lower lip and stared surreptitiously out his office door as he watched JC walk down the hall. He was furious with him, but part of Justin still longed to know how JC was doing, how he had been holding up lately, what his life was like now. It was so hard to go from being intimately involved with JC to not speaking to him at all outside of terse, work-related conversations, and to his surprise, Justin found that what he missed most was hearing about the small, everyday business of JC's life. Just before everything had exploded, JC had somewhat embarrassedly confessed that he was unhappy with his laundry service, displeased with the way his shirts felt against his skin and how they were being ironed, and although he had laughed unmercifully at JC's "suffering" at the time, Justin had since wondered more than once whether the problem had been fixed and JC was comfortable again. JC had also been thinking about getting new jogging shoes -- there was something off about the ones he was currently using, something he couldn't quite define but that had been bugging him for a while -- but Justin was now never going to know how that had been resolved, either.

And JC had also been playing around with the idea of maybe cutting his hair: to this insane idea, Justin had expressed displeasure in no uncertain terms, and he'd finally, he thought, been able to finagle a promise out of JC that he wouldn't do it. But now that they were apart, Justin had had to let all of this go, to realize that he no longer had a right to that information or those conversations. All he could do now was look nervously each day at JC to see what his hair looked like.

And then there were the things he'd shared with JC. Justin had been joking on and off with him about maybe buying a new couch, and now, every time Justin so much as looked at his beloved orange couch, he heard JC's laughter and the many, many insults JC had heaped upon it -- and then heard as well the voice JC used when he'd said things like, "Well, the couch does have some advantages," a low, seductive tone he knew would make Justin shiver and remember being bent over the back of it. Also, JC had been bugging him to get what he called an "appropriate" winter coat for work, and Justin had known, just *known*, that there were going to be a series of complicated arguments and negotiations over that, but now there was nothing. Given the way JC looked at him these days, he couldn't care less whether Justin had a coat at all.

It hurt each time Justin remembered another conversation or argument they'd had; it hurt each time Justin realized, while he was alone in his apartment, that he was dying to tell JC something that he knew would make him laugh, and that he couldn't. It was as if he had to break up with JC over and over again, had to feel the pain each time he was reminded of yet another intimacy they no longer shared.

To be sure, he wasn't revealing any of this to JC: his own anger was still too keen, and given the way JC had been acting lately, his was, too. Justin had been fighting back to the best of his ability: if JC were going to be imperious, demanding, and distant, if he were going to flaunt beautiful women from his past in front of Justin, then Justin was not above certain

devices of his own. He'd taken weeks of jibing from Lance after he'd sweet-talked him in the deli for JC's benefit, but that had felt good -- it had felt surprisingly wonderful to see the tight, unhappy look on JC's face after he'd hung up.

But as of late the more overt displays had stopped -- although it was clear that both of them were still both very angry, they had settled into a crisp, distant formality. It was killing Justin, but he couldn't see another way to handle things.

The shrill ring of the phone startled Justin out of his thoughts; it was an internal call, which was good, and it could not be JC because JC had just walked by him, which was even better. Grabbing the receiver, Justin leaned back in his chair and spoke a polite greeting.

It was Alexandra from marketing. "Justin!" she said, her voice, as always, enthusiastic and up-beat. "You're going to come down to see yourself, aren't you?"

"See myself?"

Justin blanked until he remembered what she was talking about: a few days ago, he had appeared on a local talk show with Thomas Kearney to talk about his book, and the marketing department was set to review the tape that morning.

"I'm really sorry, but I'm swamped," Justin said immediately, not at all relishing the idea of watching himself on screen amid a group of giggling marketing and publicity people. He'd thought he'd spoken fairly well, but it was impossible to be certain.

"And I'm sorry too, but that response is rejected!" Alexandra sang out, then proceeded to cajole and hector him until he agreed to come watch the program with them.

"Oh, and we've set up the television in the library and invited everyone in the house," Alexandra blithely admitted after he'd already agreed to show up, and Justin felt himself beginning to blush in embarrassment and distress. But Alexandra was ruthless: "Be there in five minutes or risk the wrath of the entire publicity department!"

Justin hung up the phone in something of a daze, then moved to his feet and headed to the bathroom, staring blankly at his reflection in the mirror as he washed his hands. He looked tired -- he always looked tired now, and during the taping of the show, the make-up person had clucked in dismay as she'd covered the dark shadows under his eyes -- but the worst signs of his chronic exhaustion were gone. Apparently, he'd gotten used to being unhappy all the time.

When he stepped into the library, Justin very nearly walked right out again: probably the majority of the press had shown up for this, and several good-natured cat-calls were directed his way as he made his way to the back of the room and uncomfortably sank into a chair. As the show began, Chris slid into the seat beside him, leaning over and murmuring, "As usual, Timberlake, it sucks being you," and then cackling in glee when Justin glared at him.

Justin couldn't help but gasp a little in agony when first he saw himself on screen -- he was so pale! so stiff! -- but since at that moment everyone in the room was cheering, applauding, and laughing at him, he knew that no one else heard. As the interview began, Justin eventually

started to relax, however: most of it was Thomas Kearney, and for his own part, he didn't have spinach on his teeth, he looked fairly decent in his good navy blue suit, and when he spoke, he was marginally articulate.

Actually, he realized as the thing went on, he was better than marginally articulate -- he was speaking convincingly and well for both Phoenix Press and for Thomas Kearney, and a growing sense of pride and relief filled him as the realization sunk in. He was almost, he had to admit, happy about the whole thing -- until, that is, JC sauntered casually into the room, leaned against the wall, and calmly inclined his head toward the television. From that point onward, Justin's attention was divided between assessing his own performance and JC's response to it, which required several careful glances out of the corner of his eye and made everything much more stressful and difficult.

JC was too experienced at hiding his reactions for Justin to get much, but from time to time he smiled faintly, and once he shook his head in what seemed to be amusement. It was oddly rewarding to see him react like that, and when the program ended and the room filled with good-natured shouts and applause, Justin couldn't help but look once more in JC's direction, only to find, much to his disappointment, that JC had left the room.

Before people began to disperse, Linda, the marketing manger, stood up and said, "Well done, Justin. Excellent publicity for both Kearney and the press."

Justin wanted to be happy about that, he really did, but something was nagging at him, something that refused to go away. Would it really have been so hard for JC to stay in the room and give him support as well? Was he really so wary of complimenting Justin? He had done a good job -- a great job, even -- and as the director of the press that had just benefited from Justin's performance, JC should have stayed to congratulate him.

Pasting a smile of thanks onto his face, he nodded cheerfully at Linda, bid Chris goodbye, and then hurried back to his office, where he buried himself in work until the annoyance and bad feelings went away.

But as he read the e-mail marketing sent out that afternoon, the one copied to JC and to the entire house, the one that said that after the appearance, sales of Kearney's book had spiked noticeably, Justin was suddenly enraged all over again. He had done well. He deserved recognition for that fact.

He was still fuming about it when JC appeared, distant and somber as always, at his door to hand off a stack of reviews to him.

"Thanks," Justin said, and then, as JC nodded curtly and started to leave his office as quickly as he'd entered it, spoke again. "By the way, what did you think of the interview with Kearney?"

JC came to a stop at the door and looked steadily at him, his eyes bright and unreadable, obviously full of impatience to be away from Justin. Out of the office and away from Justin entirely.

"It's always good to get publicity," he finally said, his voice level.

For a moment, Justin was filled with irrational hurt, because was that all that JC could say? Was that his only response? That, Justin decided, was definitely not enough.

"I looked -- did you see that e-mail from marketing?" he asked, not caring that JC's mouth tightened as he spoke, not caring that he was already looking out the door and down the hallway.

"I've been too busy to read e-mail today, Justin," JC almost snapped, his face slightly flushed, and for an instant Justin was convinced that he was lying, which was absolutely confounding.

"Well, I'll just tell you, then: they said that sales spiked appreciably after the show aired. So, you know, I must've done a pretty good job, I guess." After he said this, Justin looked steadily at JC and waited.

"Thomas Kearney did a good job," JC finally said, his eyes colder than Justin would have thought possible. "You just did what I pay you to do."

"Yeah, but --" Justin began as anger and hurt suffused him again, but JC had already stepped out of his office and called to someone else in the hallway.

Breathing quickly in frustration and amazement, Justin closed the door to his office, picked up his phone, and called Lance to commiserate.

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"Not a bad party for a small company," Lance said as he surveyed the room.

Justin elbowed him in the ribs. "Shut up. It's great by any standard."

And indeed it was. JC apparently approached the hiring of first-rate party planners with the same intensity he did everything else, and the press library hardly looked like itself tonight. The lighting was subtle and indirect, small tables had been moved in to replace the heavy reading desks, and there was a space in the middle of the floor for dancing, which would no doubt commence once the string quartet stopped playing. Caterers circulated with trays of tiny, delicious crackers covered in chicken liver mousse or pâté; there were also light, flaky pastries glazed in honey that melted sweetly and slowly on the tongue. And, of course, there were free drinks and lots of champagne. Justin was decidedly uninterested in the latter, but he was more than glad to avail himself of the very good, very dry red wine that was being distributed rather freely. Everyone was visiting the bar repeatedly but no one was too obviously drunk or foolish. There was something about an office party that kept people from losing it completely, Justin thought as he watched everyone walking carefully and sedately, all on best behavior.

There was also something about JC that kept people from breaking loose: he was at the top of the room, lean and gorgeous in his black suit, both visible to and quite clearly watching them all. Justin frowned as he took in JC's confident, easy stance, saw how perfectly comfortable and polished he seemed, how very unaffected by anything. It was so wrong that JC could make everything seem so effortless, particularly when Justin himself was strung out at having to be here at all.

"So what is this thing for again?" Lance asked through a mouthful of baklava.

"Fall list," Justin said, swallowing a huge mouthful of wine as he watched JC give Elise Martin a devastating smile. "We did a lot better than anyone thought -- got some great reviews and some great early sales -- and so we're here to celebrate."

Lance raised his eyebrows. "So your boss must be doing a good job after all."

"That was never an issue for me," Justin said. "I always knew he was good at his job. The question is whether he's good at anything else."

"Yeah, well, sounds like he was good at at least one thing," Lance said wickedly, and then quickly stepped back as Justin pretended to punch him.

"Shut up. It's over. That's all over." Justin said, and Lance rolled his eyes and changed the subject.

"So are you going to introduce me to your friends, or don't you have any?"

"You know, Lance, I invited you here to offer support, not so you could insult me all night."

"Support? Hmm," Lance said, and looked carefully across the room, his eyes narrowing a bit. "Well, I suppose that's one word for it."

"You have something else to suggest?"

Lance looked over Justin's shoulder again, then quickly said, "Well, since our fun-loving antics have apparently attracted the attention of someone else in the room, yeah -- I'd say for more than support. You know, you should have warned me about this. If I'd known he was going to watch us all night, I would've brushed up on my acting skills."

Justin frowned. "Hey, it's not like that," he said. "Really."

"Okay, good," Lance murmured. "Lean in just a little bit more and . . . yeah. Oh yeah. He looks furious, Justin. He does not like me one bit."

Justin shook his head. "Would you forget about him for just a minute?"

Lance looked Justin straight in the eye. "What -- like you have?"

Justin couldn't help but flush a little bit at that. "The thing is, I'm trying," he said in a low voice. "I really am. It's just -- well, you see him. You see what he looks like over there -- you see how he moves, how he smiles, how he is. I mean, it's just -- no matter how stupid it is, no matter how big of an asshole he turned out to be, I can't ignore him. I want to, but I can't."

"Hey," Lance said almost compassionately, and Justin blinked. "I know. I know it's hard, and I think you're doing a great job with it, Justin. Really."

"Oh my god. Were you just nice to me? Has hell frozen over?" Justin asked, and then he and Lance cracked up.

"What is this I see?" a sharp voice suddenly said. "Could it be . . . someone actually having fun at the company party? What the fuck, Justin?"

Justin dragged Chris into a loose hug, careful not to spill either his wine or the complicated fruit drink Chris was toting. "Sorry, man. I'll get with the program and look miserable like everyone else in just a minute."

"Or, you know, you could spare us all that pleasure." Chris then turned abruptly to Lance, his eyes snapping with mischief. "Hi. I'm the one Justin slept with to get to the top -- and you are?"

"Jesus, Chris," Justin spluttered as Lance said, "I'm the one who keeps him there."

Lance and Chris exchanged evil grins then looked expectantly at Justin, who hissed, "And both of you can shut the fuck up, because not even -- not in your wildest dreams, okay?"

As Chris and Lance laughed, Justin excused himself and began to walk the perimeter of the room, taking time to say hello to Karen Anderson, who as always was pretty and who as always smiled with genuine kindness at him, and then hesitantly looking at the group of pinched, bitter manuscript editorial folks over in the corner. No way in hell he was going to try to talk to those people. Finally Justin was back at the bar, and it seemed the right thing to have another glass of wine right then, so he did before continuing his circuit. He was now only about ten feet from where JC was standing and talking to someone from marketing, closer and closer to having to say hello to him, which he knew he was obliged to do -- etiquette dictated clear and simple that you thanked the boss when he threw a party for the company. To his dismay, Justin's heart began to pound a little more quickly and he also felt his breathing start to hitch. It was just -- JC was so --

It was so deeply unfair that he was still so physically attracted to JC, particularly when Justin was also so very angry at him. And over the past few weeks JC had made it more than obvious to Justin that he felt little more than disgust for him. It hurt to know that JC still believed he was an ambitious, scheming liar, hurt to know that JC didn't want anything to do with him outside of work. It was as if he'd been tainted, made ugly to JC in a way he could never change, because JC didn't seem very much like the forgiving type.

But Justin was definitely not the only one who needed forgiving. JC's behavior to Joey had been just as unscrupulous as Justin's toward JC -- maybe moreso. Justin hadn't taken away anyone's livelihood over a personal grudge, now had he? Justin hadn't made anyone's work life miserable either, and he certainly hadn't retreated into a cold, judgmental shell in the face of a complicated, difficult situation. JC was so infuriatingly remote, so very inclined to isolate himself, and suddenly, Justin was angry all over again, and before he knew it, his new glass of wine was empty, too. Should he double back to get more or move forward to have the horrible conversation with JC?

A single glance at Nick Carter -- who was actually looking pretty good tonight in a nicely cut gray suit as he made his way up to JC, one hand outstretched in greeting -- answered Justin's question for him. No way he was going to have an awkward talk with JC in front of Nick. Justin got the wine, settled himself at respectful distance from Nick and JC, then decided that the second Nick left, he'd move in.

Justin took a tentative step forward to better position himself and then stopped, amazement rocketing through him as he watched Nick smile invitingly at JC, watched Nick put his hand on JC's arm and squeeze a little bit. That was just -- how dare Nick, and how stupid was he? Even from where he was standing Justin could see the warning in JC's eyes and in the way he held himself, but Nick was oblivious, completely so. He must be really, really drunk, Justin thought, taking another swallow of his own wine and trying not to wince as he watched Nick lean in close to JC, murmuring something in his ear.

And that, of course, was it: less than a second later, JC stared in disbelief at Nick, his face almost frozen with disdain, and responded definitively to the overture. No one in the room but Nick could hear it, but Justin could pretty well guess what JC was saying, particularly after he caught a glimpse of Nick's wide-eyed and pale face as JC finished. As Justin knew only too well at this point, it was humiliating to be on the wrong end of one of JC's taut, devastating rejections, and had Carter not been such an ass, Justin might almost have felt sorry for him.

Nick was obviously shaken as he excused himself and quickly stepped away from JC: he wouldn't try that again soon, probably wouldn't ever come on to JC again. But really -- how stupid was it to try to pick up JC at work? Carter deserved what he'd got.

JC must have been aware that Justin was watching them, because the moment after Nick left, he fixed his gaze on Justin, eyes electric and steady and unreadable, and then beckoned for him to approach. Justin carefully placed his wine glass on an unoccupied table, took a series of quick, shallow breaths, then moved in.

"Good evening," he said as politely as he could, and held out a hand.

"Justin." JC's voice was calm and low, but the way he glanced over Justin's shoulder to watch the still retreating Nick as he shook Justin's hand meant that he was still not over his anger.

"I just wanted to thank you for the party. It's very nice," Justin said, and then flushed a little as JC kept holding his hand and looked hard at him for just a second, deep into his eyes and then quickly down and over his body.

"Yes. You're welcome," JC politely said then, dropping Justin's hand, all business again. "You saw Nick Carter proposition me a minute ago, right?"

"I saw the two of you talking, if that's what you mean," Justin said in surprise, because JC's tone was far, far more hostile than it needed to be. It wasn't as if Justin had propositioned him.

JC narrowed his eyes and spoke in a low voice. "You know, I find it . . . interesting that Nick Carter has all of a sudden decided that it's all right to come on to me at a work function."

Justin shrugged. "Who knows how his mind works?"

"Yes, well, who knows how anyone might act if they knew the boss had already made that particular stupid mistake before?" JC asked in a soft, ugly voice. "Who knows what people might do if that kind of information got out?"

For a few seconds all Justin could do was stare at JC in shock, but then the words found him. "You jerk," he said in a low, shaking voice. "I did not, JC. I did not, and I would not. That was private, and I understand privacy, and I just -- I wouldn't. I wouldn't." Too angry even to make sense at this point, Justin settled for nodding curtly at JC. "Great party, thanks so much," he sarcastically finished, and then quickly moved off.

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How dare he? Justin fumed as he made his way back to the bar. How dare JC suggest that he'd reveal what had gone on between them, particularly to Nick Carter? Really, it seemed as if in JC's estimation there was no behavior too low for Justin.

"Asshole," Justin said quietly, furiously, and then made his way back to Lance, who was, amazingly, only just saying goodbye to Chris.

"Justin, hey." Lance raised his eyebrows. "I take it you spoke with JC?"

Justin nodded just once, a short, violent gesture, and then shook his head to clear it. He was not going to let JC get to him tonight, not like that, not over something so patently stupid. He took a deep breath, pushed the anger to the side, and then said, "So you and Chris got along, I see."

"Yeah, he's pretty cool," Lance said off-handedly.

Justin tried hard, but not too hard, not to smirk. "You think he's cute -- I can tell. You've got that look in your eye."

"What I think is that he's straight." Lance laughed and then looked reflectively back at Chris. "And yeah. Also cute."

Justin grinned. "Well who knows? People have revelations all the time."

"Oh, sure. Exactly," Lance said and then looked across the room again, obviously scanning for JC.

"So, I had a pretty unpleasant conversation with him, but I'm not letting it get to me and I don't want to talk about it," Justin told him. "I'm perfectly happy here, and I do not need --"

"I know, I know." Lance squinted a bit, then muttered, "But in case you wondered, he's still watching you, and he still hates me."

"Lots of people hate you," Justin reminded him, and then turned around and plastered a smile on his face as Derek Thompson, the head of manuscript editorial, tapped him gently on the shoulder.

"Justin!" Derek said, grinning, and nodded politely at Lance.

"Derek, meet my good friend Lance Bass." Justin frowned a little as he watched Derek's eyebrows raise in speculation. Lance grinned and shook Derek's hand.

"So you know that Justin's almost single-handedly made this season a success for us, don't you?" Derek mischievously said to Lance, and Justin groaned and shook his head.

"No, I don't believe he had mentioned that." Lance sounded very amused.

"Really, it's nothing -- it's --"

"See, Justin here is bringing us good books -- really good books. And to make it even better, the books he's bringing in are actually selling." Derek beamed at Justin. "Swear to god, Justin, it's incredible."

"Well. Of course you know the books -- they probably wouldn't be half as good without the editing you and your staff do --" Justin began, then shut up completely as Derek and Lance laughed at him.

"Is he always like this?" Derek asked, shaking his head.

"Ever since college." Lance was smiling affectionately at Justin. "Earnest as hell, but so damn cute you can't resist it."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?" Justin said, and Lance and Derek erupted into laughter again.

"So," Derek carefully began, and Justin could practically see him salivating for new gossip. "How long have you two been together?"

"Lance has been my best friend for -- god -- five years now, isn't it?"

"Best friend?" Derek raised his eyebrows and looked significantly at Lance.

"I know, I know, it's a shame what with him being so pretty and all, but it just -- not for us. It doesn't work that way," Lance said, and Derek laughed.

"Well, Justin, you're going to have to get someone here soon. We can't have you pining away forever, you know."

"Pining?" Justin resisted the urge to bite his lip, because what had Derek heard? Had Derek noticed a time when Justin wasn't pining and was he now comparing him to that? What was going on?

Justin was almost about to ask Derek some of these questions in coded form when a hush started to spread across the room. Justin looked around in surprise until he saw JC looking expectantly at everyone, clearly waiting until he had all the attention in the room.

So there was going to be a speech.

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"Oh my god," Justin breathed as the anger swept through him yet again.

"Justin, really, calm down." Lance's voice was low and even, but the hand he'd placed on Justin's shoulder gripped him tightly. "I don't even get why you're so upset. I mean, he complimented you, and in front of all your co-workers. What more could you want?"

"What I want is for him to be just half of a decent human being!" Justin said a bit too loudly, then ducked his head in embarrassment as several curious glances were directed his way.

"Okay, so tell me, then. Tell me what's indecent about 'and this entire press owes thanks especially to Justin Timberlake, who brought us many of these books.' He basically said the whole place owes you."

Justin shook his head vehemently. "No. No, see, that's what he said in public. That's what he said when he knew he was far away from me and didn't have to confront me. When it was just me and him, he -- uh. He wasn't saying such nice things." Justin's face flared again as he recalled the contempt in JC's voice, and his fury seemed to increase exponentially. "Oh my god, I hate him!"

"You are making a spectacle of yourself," Lance sternly said, glaring at him. "Stop it now, Justin -- right now, or go someplace to calm down, because you're not helping yourself by losing it like this."

Justin let out a breath he didn't even know he'd been holding and nodded. "Thanks. Yeah," he said to Lance, and then gently shook free of his grip. "I'm gonna -- I think I'm just gonna go someplace quiet to think."

"That's an excellent idea." Lance looked carefully at him. "Want me to come along?"

Justin smiled weakly at Lance to show him that he was calming down. "Nah. I just -- I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

"Okay." Lance gently nudged Justin toward the door. "Go get normal again."

Justin managed another twisted grin, and then carefully walked out of the library and down the spiral stairs, his teeth clenched and his jaw taut. JC had done some annoying, stupid things before, but this was just . . . Could he not even say one kind thing to Justin's face? Did it always have to be so ugly when they talked? Why was he such a royal jerk?

His first thought was to go to the safety of his own office, but as he passed the conference room, Justin decided to stop there instead: it was closer and would suffice just as well. The door to the room was locked, and Justin swore out loud in the dark hallway and then fished in his pants pocket for his keys, fumbling with them until he found the right one. The conference room was dark and soothing, the light from the skyline of the city casting hazy, ghostly shadows over the table and chairs. Justin closed the door silently behind him and breathed deeply, trying to release his tension and fury as he watched the reflection from the traffic far below flicker gently on the walls. It was incredibly stupid to give JC this kind of power over him, to let him prey so expertly on his emotions. Justin needed to step back exactly the way JC had been doing, to make himself invulnerable and protected. Justin sighed heavily and rubbed the back of his neck. He was acting like a child.

When he heard another key in the door, Justin turned in surprise, quickly gathering himself and preparing to meet a drunk couple seeking a place to make out. When the door swung open, he was standing a few feet from it, a story about how he'd felt sick for a moment and had needed a place to calm down springing to his lips.

The story evaporated, however, when he saw who entered the room: JC, his face half lit by the light coming in from the window; JC, taking in a long breath and bringing a hand to his neck; JC, lifting his eyes to peer at Justin.

"What are you doing in here all alone in the dark?" His voice was low and sardonic and infinitely annoying.

"I can't imagine you actually think I owe you an explanation," Justin replied.

JC moved further into the room, then glanced out the window at the skyline. "Your pretty boyfriend get mad at you and leave?"

"You know, I'm not sure I think that's an appropriate topic of conversation for me to be having with my supervisor," Justin snapped, and felt a surge of triumph as he watched JC's shoulders stiffen.

"Yet obviously you have something you want to say, or you wouldn't still be standing here. So why don't you just say it?"

"Quite frankly, you've been so rude to me tonight that I don't want to talk to you at all."

JC leaned languidly against the wall and laughed derisively, bringing a hand to his eyes and rubbing them before looking at Justin again. "You want me to be nicer to you? Is that it? Have I hurt your feelings?"

"Don't flatter yourself. You don't have the power to upset me anymore," Justin said, and JC laughed again, which was even more infuriating.

"Pardon me if I beg to differ on that point," he softly said, and Justin glared at him even as part of him also registered that JC had unbuttoned his jacket and loosened his tie before coming in here, that his hair was curling wildly and that he seemed oddly animated, intense and on the edge. Suddenly, Justin wanted to hurt his feelings.

"And you'll have even less power to do that when I leave the press."

JC took a couple of steps toward him and Justin bit his lip as he watched the light play over his cheekbone, the side of his neck, the curve of his mouth.

"You're threatening me?" JC's voice was dangerous now, his eyes sharp in the dim light. "I'm not sure that's wise, particularly given what happened the last time you tried to outwit me."

"I have offers," Justin lied. "Several of them -- and they're from publishing houses that aren't run by spoiled maniacs."

"I'll bet you do," JC murmured, and moved even closer, and it was all Justin could do not to shiver at the sharp, excited expression on JC's face -- a disturbingly hot combination of the way he looked right before he closed a deal and right before he wanted to have sex.

"I'll bet you want to discuss counteroffers," JC said even more quietly, and now he was so close that Justin could see his chest rising and falling as he breathed, could feel his anger and his desire and his intensity. "Want me to bargain for you? Want me to try to buy you back? Is that it?"

"You can do whatever you want to do." Justin purposely kept his voice steady and uninterested. "I'll have a look at what you offer and think it over."

"Hm," JC said thoughtfully, and inclined his head. "I wonder what these prospective employers think about plagiarism?"

"Don't you dare try to intimidate me. I'm not afraid of you." Justin stepped forward himself, moved until they were just inches apart, until he could smell JC's cologne, his anger, his excitement, could lock eyes with him in a furious stare.

"That's good to know," JC murmured, and stared right back, unblinking and unwavering, and Justin's entire world shrank to a single set of angry blue eyes, a single face half cast in pale, glowing light.

"In fact, I mean to give you a letter of resignation sometime this week," Justin said, and he meant it; he did. He had contacts in the business, and now he had experience, too, and for the most part, a really good record at Phoenix. He could find something.

"You'd leave it just like that?" JC asked, sounding almost interested now. "You'd walk away from all the hard work you've done to put your department in order, all the work you've done to build your list?"

"I --" No was the immediate response that popped into Justin's mind, but he couldn't say that, couldn't let it out.

"You're really that desperate to get away from me?"

That was a much easier question. "Desperate is hardly the word, but you're getting warm," Justin said smugly. See how JC liked that. See how JC liked knowing that he no longer had power over him.

But JC didn't look quite as upset as Justin thought he should; in fact, he actually looked a little . . . hungry maybe, eager about something.

"Justin. Seriously? I don't think you should leave Phoenix," JC finally said, and Justin widened his eyes just a fraction, because that was JC's honest voice, his sincere voice.

"I don’t recall asking for your opinion," Justin said with some satisfaction.

"But if you do decide to go," JC continued as if Justin had not spoken, "you let me know the second you make the choice," JC murmured. "Absolutely the moment you decide, Justin."

"Why?" Justin asked incredulously. "What do you care?"

"Because until you're no longer my employee, I can't do this," JC said, his voice shaking, and then stepped forward, his hands settling firmly on Justin's hips, and then pulled Justin into a kiss.

The warmth of JC's mouth on his was unexpected and devastating, and Justin reeled in shock. For a moment he couldn't believe it was happening: this was madness, and the pain of once again feeling that clever, smart tongue, those strong, roving hands, made Justin tremble as his rage shuddered into awareness and arousal.

JC pulled him closer and moaned hungrily as Justin's mouth softened and he started to respond, and then Justin was gripping JC's narrow waist and pressing desperately back into the heat of his body.

When JC lifted his head, he swore softly, his eyes dark and needy, his hands trembling. Justin stared right back at him through the dim, silvery light, looking hungrily at his slightly swollen mouth, the flush staining his cheekbones, and unable to stop himself from pressing his hips forward again and again, desperately seeking to bring their bodies together once more.

"Shh," JC said, then tightened his hands on Justin's hips and firmly walked him backward until Justin felt the conference table digging into the backs of his thighs. When JC's hands moved quickly and efficiently to the waistband of Justin's pants, easily opening his belt, unbuttoning and unzipping his pants and then dragging them down, Justin groaned in spite of himself, then let JC's hands on his shoulders gently press him down and urge him backward until he was spread out on the table.

When JC loomed over him, his eyes flashing in the dark, his mouth partway open, Justin gasped and lifted his head to look anxiously out the window of the conference room, eyes peering into the dark hallway.

"Someone might see us," he gasped as JC's knee began to coax his legs apart.

"What do you care? You're resigning. Besides, I think you want this too much to stop," JC murmured, eyes locked on Justin, voice rough and low. "Don’t you?"

"It would just look very, very bad," Justin tried, and then simply gasped and watched as JC moved sinuously down his body, watched it almost as if in slow motion. Then he had JC's mouth on his cock, JC's hot, tight mouth, and Justin clenched his jaw and let out a tiny, strained sound, a small fraction of the long, hoarse cry threatening to break out of him. Without even realizing it, he'd buried his hands in JC's hair just like he used to, had begun trembling and sighing as he listened to the contented, hungry moans JC was making, as he watched the light play over JC's curls, dance in the hollows of his cheeks.

The entire world was hazy and dreamlike, full of raw, intense sensation and the firm pressure of JC's hands on his stomach. Justin dragged in a deep breath and then nearly choked on it as he realized that he was on the verge of begging JC to fuck him -- realized that he would do it openly and unashamedly if JC were allowed to continue this much longer. Justin glanced

desperately at the ceiling, watching the lights slide over it in random patterns, and struggled for control. He was losing it -- he was so close here to losing it all.

"JC, someone's going to come -- someone's going to hear -- we're going to --"

JC lifted his head and for a moment looked over his shoulder, his eyes dark and calculating. "Are you saying that you want me to stop?" he asked in a low, silky voice.

"What I'm saying is--" Justin started, but then JC bent to him again and Justin's mind blanked for a while until he again allowed himself to look out the window. Was that a shape in the shadows? Was someone watching them? He gently tightened his fingers on JC's scalp -- shivering helplessly at the steady, regular rhythm of JC's mouth, the tight, hot sweeping of his tongue. "JC, please."

As Justin had known it would, that brought JC's head up, made his eyes dark and triumphant and delighted.

"Please what?" he whispered, his voice tight with desire, and then he moved sinuously up Justin's body, arms snaking around Justin, hips starting to press forward, his hunger seeming to fill the room.

"Please," Justin said again, but couldn't quite get out his concerns about people outside because he was too busy sliding a hand down to JC's waist, reveling in the fact that for this instant at least he had the absolute right to do this. JC groaned out loud, his head falling to Justin's shoulder as Justin quickly, roughly opened his pants and wrapped his hand tightly around JC’s cock.

"Oh god," Justin exhaled. It felt so fucking good to hold JC's cock again, to remember its weight, its breadth, and to feel JC become helpless as he gave him what he wanted. For a few moments, Justin simply let himself stroke JC, JC's gasps and moans warming the skin of his shoulder through his shirt. Then, however, JC reached for his cock again, and if JC touched him -- if JC were allowed to do what he could do, then Justin truly was lost.

Justin grabbed JC's hips, dragging him closer, and growled, "Let's switch," and it was a measure of how very far gone JC was, how completely under the sway of desire, that he did it, let Justin grab his shoulders and press him onto his back.

Before he moved further, Justin looked hesitantly over his shoulder and out the window to the hallway, then froze in horror, his heart pounding double time and his breathing coming to halt in a gasp.

"What?" JC struggled up to his elbows and peered out the window as well, one hand splayed warmly over Justin's rib cage.

"I thought I saw -- I thought --"

"It's nothing. There's no one out there," JC said flatly. "But there eventually will be if you keep hesitating like that."

Annoyed, Justin met JC's eyes again, then deliberately rolled his hips forward, neatly positioning himself between JC's legs and making a small, triumphant noise as he watched JC arch his back and gasp.

"Oh, you've missed this," Justin said very slowly, taking pleasure in watching JC unravel, because damn it, it had been far, far too long since he'd seen that. "You won't admit it, but you need it, need me, need me so much. I see it every day in your eyes." And then it was the simplest thing in the world to grind down again and again, to bring their bodies together exactly how they both loved it, to let their slick cocks rub roughly, wantonly together. JC gripped Justin's hips so tightly he knew he was going to bruise, using his strength to bring Justin where he wanted him, and because it felt so fucking good, better than anything had felt in forever, Justin let him, just gave in and rocked steadily until his vision started to grow fuzzy and his breath caught in his throat. He was whining a little bit, practically keening now, and then JC murmured something low and calm and just so fucking hot and that was it -- Justin stuttered hips crazily, froze, and then let out the beginning of an agonized moan before immediately muffling himself and holding the rest of it in. He came and he came, and he could feel JC bucking beneath him, coming too, fiercely whispering his name and pulling him close, and for a few seconds, Justin wrapped his arms around JC and held him, and everything was perfect: he had JC and the lights of the city were playing over their bodies, and it felt like heaven, everything was where it should be.

As Justin lowered his head to JC's shoulder and spread his hands out wide on his back, tentatively easing into the embrace, JC stiffly said, "Apparently you needed that, too" -- it was a taunt, and it brought Justin back to himself, back to his degraded, awful present, back to the fact that he'd practically just fucked his boss into the table of the conference room. The table in front of the window in the conference room.

"Oh god," Justin said unhappily, and quickly rolled off JC, grabbing clumsily at his trousers and underwear and grimacing as he ran a hand through the mess on his stomach and abdomen. There was a bathroom right down the hall -- he could --

"I'm. The bathroom," he said as JC, who had moved to sit easily and calmly on the side of the table, his face made deeper and leaner by the shadows, looked steadily at him.

"Yeah. Okay," JC said quietly, and a horrible awkwardness filled the room.

Justin grabbed the front of his pants together and held his suit jacket over top of them, planning to rush to the bathroom that way, and then headed for the door. Just before he reached it however, JC spoke, and though he didn't look back, couldn't look back, Justin froze as he listened.

"I should probably tell you that I'm going to be in Europe for the next week or so," JC said in an even, conversational tone. "So if you're going to resign, e-mail the letter, all right?"

In Europe? Resign? Justin couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see his face, and so he simply ducked his head, mumbled, "Okay, yeah," and then cracked the door open, made sure no one was in the hall, and quickly, clumsily lumbered toward the bathroom.

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The next morning Justin strode down the hallway and toward his office, head down, sunglasses still on. Co-workers greeted him and he didn't even slow down to respond, just nodded and gave a weak smile. He left the sunglasses on -- nobody needed to see the effects of too much alcohol on top of a completely sleepless night.

Not that he could hide it for long, he thought bleakly as he entered his office and set down his bag. If memory served, he had a meeting in half an hour with the manuscript editorial and marketing departments about one of his projects. A meeting that he probably couldn't get through with dark sunglasses.

A meeting in that godforsaken conference room. How on earth was he supposed to go into that room and concentrate on business? In the silence of his office, Justin put his forehead on his desk and moaned out loud.

He'd been unable to pull himself together after stumbling back to the party the previous evening. Lance had come looking for him some undetermined time later, taken one look at Justin's flushed face and trembling hands, raised one perfect eyebrow and suggested they leave immediately. Justin had nodded gratefully, but resisted Lance's pointed questions, even when he'd observed slyly that JC, interestingly enough, had been missing from the reception at the same time Justin had. Justin had shrugged and looked out the side window of the taxi. He wasn't ready to talk about it.

But that didn't keep him from thinking about it. Thoughts of what had happened in that room the previous evening had rolled repeatedly through his mind for the entirety of the night. It had been an exhausting cycle -- crystal-clear memories first of JC on his knees in front of him in the darkened room, making him gasp, followed by recollections of JC's pointed and painful insults, making him rage. Justin would close his eyes and writhe in humiliation at the memory of his own hoarse voice, and then pound his pillow in fury and frustration at the way he'd provoked JC. He didn't know whether to be more furious at himself for goading JC in the first place, or at JC for his sheer, fucking gall; at himself for his deep, uncontrollable longing for JC, or at JC for taking advantage of that.

If only it hadn't been so good, so intense, so completely, mind-blowingly hot. Even now the memory of JC's fingers digging into his hips, the wet heat of his mouth was enough to make Justin groan.

Justin pulled his face off his desk and leaned back in his chair, taking a deep breath. He was completely weary, tired from more than the previous sleepless night. He was tired from working a hundred hours a week, tired from the stress of trying to pull the music department together, tired of trying to avoid seeing and thinking about JC. Tired of being angry, tired of feeling guilty, tired, tired, tired.

He closed his eyes for a moment and almost immediately felt his body start to relax, his mind start to drift. Of course, he thought hopelessly. Now that he had no time to sleep, of course this was the time that his brain and body would finally shut down and let him do it. It was so wrong.

Justin levered himself up with an effort and uncapped his coffee mug, taking a deep gulp and praying the caffeine would hit his system before he had to walk in to that conference room.

At least JC wouldn't be at this particular meeting. The thought felt cowardly, and he grimaced.

He cupped his hands around the comforting warmth of his mug and stared bleakly at the manuscript he'd left front and center on his desk. It was something he needed to discuss with JC, and if JC was leaving for Europe soon . . .

Justin sighed and drank more of his coffee. The whole situation was so unbearably confusing, so infuriating. JC was more than willing to continue to employ him, but he treated Justin with a businesslike politeness so icy it was almost insulting. And on a personal level, Justin thought painfully, JC didn't seem to feel anything for him except scorn.

But if that were true, why did what happened the previous evening in the conference room happen?

His phone rang, interrupting Justin's distressing train of thought, and he glared at it. It was probably Lance, he thought resentfully. It was too early to be anyone else. Without thinking about it he snatched up the receiver and spoke forcefully.

"I said I didn't want to talk about it!" Justin exclaimed, and went cold at the long silence that greeted him.

"Well, okay," said Joey's cautious voice. "I figured it was too early for you to be in, and I was expecting your voice mail anyway. How about you hang up and I'll just, uh, leave you a message?"

Justin felt his mouth fall open in complete shock, and for a moment he couldn't say anything. "Joey!" he exclaimed finally. "Jesus, man. I can't believe I'm hearing your voice."

Joey's laugh was a little uncomfortable. "Yeah, I'm really sorry; I got your messages and I got your e-mails, but it took me a little while to, you know, get to a place where I could call you back."

Justin sat back, his heart pounding a little. "Well, I'm really glad you did," he offered hesitantly, and felt his tension ease a little as Joey laughed.

"Wells, thanks for that. And yeah, Justin, I've been wanting to call you. I wondered if maybe you had time for lunch sometime this week?"

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I can make time," Justin said, scrambling for his calendar. "Today, even. If you want."

"Today is great," Joey said warmly, and Justin smiled. "How about that Mexican place, the one with the stuffed donkey piñata in the lobby?"

"Perfect," Justin said. "That would be great. Is 1:00 okay for you?"

"I'll see you there," Joey said, and Justin replaced the receiver with a smile. JC was leaving the country, his friend Joey had finally returned his phone call, maybe things were looking up. He glanced at the clock and rose. Maybe he could actually face his meeting in the

conference room of shame now. But first, he thought as he squared his shoulders, first he would stop being a coward, and talk to JC.

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Justin took a deep breath as he started up the stairs to the executive level. He had every legitimate reason to be seeking JC out -- the manuscript needed to be discussed and it needed to be discussed with the director. With Joey gone and Justin running the department virtually alone, there was no one else he could turn to. He should probably draft a memo to JC about it, Justin thought resentfully; in fact JC would no doubt prefer a memo to a face-to-face, one-on-one meeting. But after the previous night's fiasco, Justin thought it was important to put their dealings with each other back on a professional footing before JC left for Europe.

Plus Justin had a powerful urge to look into JC's eyes this morning and try to get a read on exactly what was going on in his mind. Whether that urge was brave or just plain stupid, Justin couldn't say.

Determined though he was, it still took Justin half the morning to gather up the courage to climb the spiral stairs to the executive level and walk the long hallway leading to JC's office. He thumbed nervously through the manuscript as he walked and tried to rehearse what he would say -- the manuscript was brilliant, it deserved JC's immediate attention and consideration for late inclusion on the spring list, and he was certain, utterly certain that there were other publishing houses with just as keen an interest in this book.

It was a shock to step into JC's open door and find his office lifeless and silent. He blinked in astonishment and then jumped when JC's assistant appeared at his elbow.

" . . . the Lear red-eye to London last night instead of leaving tonight," he was saying, pushing past Justin to leave a stack of neat folders in JC's inbox. "Didn't he tell you?"

A bewildering dismay spread slowly through Justin. London suddenly seemed so far away.

"You know, I think he did say he was going, but not that he'd moved up his flight," Justin said with an embarrassed laugh, feeling his face heat up as he suddenly remembered just how and when JC had told him that he was going to Europe. "Or if he did, I totally missed it."

Mark smiled understandingly. "Things have been pretty crazy for you since Joey left, I hear," he said with some sympathy, and Justin nodded, still staring in to JC's empty office. "You can e-mail him," Mark suggested as he went out the door. "He's pretty good about checking it, or you can call him on his cell if it's really urgent."

Justin shook his head, alarm flashing through him at the thought of calling JC. "I'll e-mail," he said with a brief smile of thanks. "I should've just done that in the first place."

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Justin was a little late, and the thick lunchtime crowds on the street were making him later. He dodged a tall woman speaking furiously into her cell phone and swerved around a man in a heavy coat who was using his large briefcase as a battering ram, stepping nimbly around

him and picking up his pace. The day was cold and grey, the wind whipping icily through the streets, and Justin was glad he'd grabbed his coat, even though it was only a short walk to the restaurant.

He was a little nervous. When Joey had called that morning Justin's chief feeling had been surprise and a cautious sort of relief that Joey had returned his call, that he was being nice and not, apparently, writing Justin off forever. But as the morning had worn on Justin had felt nerves start to jump in his stomach. It was impossible not to remember the last time he'd seen Joey, the horrible things that Joey had said to him. And, he admitted to himself, he had some feelings of anger and resentment too, for the condition the music department was in when Joey had left as well as for his abrupt departure. Not that that was Joey's fault, he reminded himself as he turned the corner and jogged down the sidewalk toward the restaurant. Joey wouldn't have left Justin in the lurch like this -- the fault for Joey's sudden exit belonged solely to JC.

He slid out of the crowd and pulled open the door, coming face-to-face with the large stuffed donkey piñata dominating the small entry way of the restaurant. He blinked to accustom his eyes to the dim light and looked around with slight exasperation. Of course Joey wasn't there yet; Joey probably hadn't been on time to a lunch date in his entire life.

"Justin, over here," a familiar voice called. and Justin swiveled around to see Joey, already seated at a table by the window and waving him over with a smile. He was dressed more neatly than he'd ever bothered to dress during his last months at the press, and his smile seemed open and warm. Justin felt the residual tension he'd struggled with on the walk over start to dissipate, and he greeted Joey with a grin as he slid into the chair opposite him.

"Lookin' good, J," Joey said with a smile as Justin shrugged out of his coat.

"You too," Justin returned. And it was true, Joey was bright-eyed and pink cheeked and smiling. He bore little resemblance to the pale and frowning man that Justin had gradually, without realizing it, grown accustomed to seeing. The person sitting across from him was more like the old Joey, grinning and making jokes about the absurd decor of the restaurant, and Justin felt himself relax as they made small talk before ordering.

"Kelly said to tell you hello," Joey started off, and Justin returned the greeting, almost blushing with pleasure. Kelly had always been so kind to him. Joey caught him up on the family news as the waiter brought their drinks and for a few minutes they chatted easily about Kelly's job, Briahna's pre-school, Justin's mom's recent visit.

A small silence fell after they gave their orders, and Justin felt the tension worm its way back into his stomach. He busied himself by spreading his napkin carefully on his lap and finally cleared his throat, meeting Joey's eyes.

"So, Joey. How are things? I mean, really?"

Joey blinked and smiled, a little puzzled. "Things are good, J. Everything's worked out really well, but you know that, right?"

Justin stared at him, feeling his brow furrow, and Joey leaned forward.

"Oh, well, I would've thought that your . . . I mean, I just assumed that Chasez would've told you about my new job," he said easily, taking a gulp of his water.

"You have a job?" Justin exclaimed with mingled relief and confusion and curiosity, and Joey broke into a huge smile.

"Yeah, I can't believe you didn't know about this! It's such a great job, too, Justin; really it's perfect for me and for the way I like to work." Joey started to describe his new position as a senior acquisitions editor for the musicology department at the scholarly press for New York University, and Justin sat back in his chair, eyes wide and mouth hanging open a little. Joey had gotten another job. He was okay; his family was okay.

"When?" Justin interjected as soon as Joey had run down a little. "How soon was it? Did you know about this job when you, uh. Left?"

Joey smiled at him, still looking a little puzzled. "I can't believe you don't know all this," he said incredulously. "I mean, since Chasez called me and told me about the NYU position and all."

Justin felt his eyes open wide in surprise. "What?"

"Yeah, man." Joey took another long drink of his water and then paused as the waiter arrived with their meals. "Oh, this looks so good," he said with satisfaction, and Justin fidgeted in his chair, waiting for the server to leave.

"Joey," he said finally, the suspense killing him. "JC called you? What do you mean?"

"Justin," Joey answered, setting down his fork and fixing Justin with an incredulous look. "Didn't he tell you any of this?"

"There is no reason for JC to tell me anything," Justin answered stiffly. "Just – tell me what happened, Joey, okay? Please?"

"Well, sure," Joey said carefully, and then smiled again. "Okay, so the day I got fired was pretty fucked up, you know, and holy shit, Justin, I so owe you a big fat apology for that day, and for the things I said . . ."

"Joey," Justin said with some exasperation. "The job."

"Oh! Yeah, so I went home and told Kelly all about it, and I was pretty upset and she was being so awesome, telling me not to worry, that I'd find another job. And the next morning the phone rang. So Kel answers it and I hear her sort of arguing with the person on the other line, saying that I wasn't home. And it was Chasez."

"JC called you," Justin stated quietly. His heart was pounding.

"Yeah, and it was the very next day," Joey said. "And I really didn't want to talk to him, but I figured I'd better, and he's all uptight and stuff on the phone and I was still really, really pissed off. And it was, you know, pretty uncomfortable, but he got right to the point, which was that he'd heard from the director of the NYU Press, and they were searching for an

editor, and he thought it might be something I'd want to look into." Joey paused to take a big mouthful of his enchilada and Justin clasped his hands together under the table to keep them from trembling. He couldn't eat right now if his life depended on it.

"So, you know, I wasn't really in the mood to take anything from that assho . . ." Joey looked up guiltily. "Um, sorry."

"No need to be sorry," Justin said quickly. "Look, I know you think that he and I are, uh, something," he added. "But we're not."

"Uh huh," Joey said, frowning skeptically at Justin. "Right."

"Really," Justin said desperately. "Just, god, tell me the rest."

"Hmmm. Well, if you say so," Joey said with a slightly lifted eyebrow. "Anyway," he continued more cheerfully. "So, I didn't want to take any help from him and I told him so, and he said I could do what I wanted with the information, but here it was, and if I did contact NYU I should use him as a reference."

"A reference," Justin repeated, dumbfounded.

"Yep," Joey said. "And I have to admit that that sort of stopped me in my tracks, because I know he hated me as much as I hated him, and I told him that." Joey took another big bite of his enchilada. "And he said that this had nothing to do with personal feelings, and he'd thought for a while that the sort of books I was bringing in would fit better with this kind of press, something that really focused on scholarly publications."

Justin's brain gradually started to function, and he untangled his fingers and wiped his sweating hands on his napkin. "I guess that does make sense," he said cautiously, and Joey laughed a little.

"You know, as much as I kind of hate to admit it, it really does. So I thought about it a lot over the next day, and I figured, what the hell, I'd give it a shot." Joey took another bite and wiped a spot of sauce from his mouth. "So I called this guy, the director, and he said he'd been expecting me to call, and that he was looking forward to talking to me, and that," he said, waving his fork in the air, "was pretty much that."

Justin sat in his chair, stunned, oblivious to the food growing cold in front of him. JC had fired Joey, brutally and coldly fired him and cast him out of his job. Then he'd called Joey the very next morning and helped him get another one. Justin stared at his plate and tried desperately to make sense of it.

"Joey," he said finally. "God, Joey, I'm so glad for you. It sounds like a really perfect fit for your list, and you seem really happy." Justin smiled at him, full of gratitude and heartfelt relief. "I'm just so glad that it worked out for you like this."

"Yeah," Joey said expansively. "The money isn't quite as good, but it's worth it not to be tense and unhappy all the time, you know? Kelly says it's like living with a different guy."

"I can believe that," Justin agreed. "I know how miserable you were the last couple of months at Phoenix."

"Yeah, it was pretty bad. And Justin," Joey said, leaning across the table and grimacing a little. "I have to tell you, I feel just awful about the way I left that last day. I said some really crappy things to you, and I owe you an apology."

"You were upset," Justin said quietly, and sighed. "Honestly, Joey, I feel like I owe you an apology too. That whole fuck up with the five year plan . . ."

"No, Justin, that was in no way your fault," Joey said firmly. "You only did it to help me out, I know that. And I totally pressured you."

"No, the thing is," Justin said, and then hesitated. "You know, a part of me actually enjoyed creating that report. I mean, not the pressure or secrecy, but actually thinking about the department, and its goals," he said, and raised guilty eyes to Joey's. "I liked that part. I liked making those sorts of decisions."

Joey's eyes were sober on his. "There's nothing wrong with being ambitious, and caring about your work," he said quietly. "But I was wrong to accuse you of trying to sabotage me. I'm really, really sorry about that."

Justin smiled. "We were both upset, it was a really bad day. But I understand."

"Because it was just the anger talking," Joey continued earnestly. "I know that you would never stab me in the back that way. This whole year had gone from bad to worse, and in retrospect I think I brought some it on myself. And also." He paused to take a drink of water. "I know I left you seriously in the lurch about a whole bunch of projects, and I'm sorry for that too. Chasez gave me the option of getting my things in order so I wouldn't leave you high and dry, but I was too pissed off to take him up on that."

Justin digested that in a stunned silence, and then smiled weakly at him. "Well," he admitted, "Honest to god, I felt like I was drowning for the first couple of weeks." Joey made a face, his brown eyes rich with sympathy and Justin laughed a little. "But really, I think the worst is over. It actually helped," he said carefully, "that some of your authors canceled their contracts."

"And that brings us to the third thing I wanted to apologize to you for," Joey said with a wry smile. "I should've called a lot earlier and told you that I was contacting my authors. I feel like the way I went about it was kind of underhanded."

Justin shook his head firmly. "No, man, it's good. It made me feel awful when I thought they were jumping ship because they just didn't want to work with me, but it all makes sense now that I know you're working for NYU. Of course those authors would feel more comfortable at an academic press, it's practically tailored to their specialties. And seriously," he added with a smile, "I was so fucking buried, it was almost a relief."

"Well, good," Joey said, leaning back in his chair with a sigh of relief. "I really feel like I treated you badly, and it's been bugging me something awful."

"Joey," Justin said, returning his smile and feeling a huge weight lift off his chest. "I'm so glad you called. I've been worried, and feeling really, really bad about the way things went down. It's so good to know that you're doing okay."

Joey watched him quizzically from across the table. "Seriously, I can't believe you didn't know any of this!" he exclaimed. "I mean, I thought . . . Well, you know what I thought."

"You thought wrong," Justin said quietly, finally bending to his food, aware of Joey's eyes on his face.

"But that day I saw you getting out of his car, Justin . . ."

Justin had a vivid flash of the smell of the leather upholstery, the feel of JC's warm wet mouth wrapped around him, the pinch of his own teeth as he stuffed his hand into his mouth to stifle his moans. He jerked himself back to the present and grit his teeth, forcing a smile.

"Really," he said brightly. "You thought wrong."

"I don't think I did," Joey said slowly. "I don't think I'm wrong about what was going on at the time, but maybe it's not happening any more. Is that what you're telling me?"

Justin sighed and looked up to meet his eyes. "There's nothing going on between JC and me," he said firmly.

Joey held his eyes, his own shadowed with worry. "I am sorry, Justin," he said finally. "I never liked the guy and I still don't, really, despite what he did for me. But if it was something that meant something to you, than I'm really sorry."

Justin sighed and rubbed his hand over his forehead. "There's nothing going on between JC and me," he repeated wearily, and sensed rather than saw Joey nod.

"Well, okay then," Joey said with a cheerfulness that was only a little forced. "Let me think, now, have I apologized for everything I need to apologize for?" Justin started to laugh as Joey began ticking things off on his fingers. "Apologized for being an asshole and saying rude things, check. Apologized for walking out and leaving you in the lurch, check. Apologized for not calling and telling you I was poaching my authors, check." He quirked a smile at Justin.

"Pretty good, Joey," Justin said with a smile. "Pretty slick."

"Kelly made me memorize them all before I left this morning," Joey confided, sending Justin into an unexpected peal of laughter, and just like that the tension was gone. They finished lunch and parted on the sidewalk with Justin promising to come to Joey's house for dinner the following weekend.

Justin walked back to the press with a much lighter heart, refusing for the time being to think about JC's role in Joey's good fortune. It was enough to know that his friend was okay, happy and doing well in a job that suited him. For the moment, that was enough for Justin.

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JC scowled ferociously at the final merger documents for the new takeover, then pushed back from his desk and sighed. The papers were in ridiculous condition, and the staff was going to have to stay late to get them revised properly before the series of meetings beginning the next morning. There was a great deal to do and very little time in which to get it done. Crisis situations like this were JC's forte, and he'd always surrounded himself with people who could keep up with his killing pace. But it seemed that his corporate staff had gotten lax during his absence this year, or perhaps there were other problems with this merger that he didn't yet know about. It was also possible that they'd been counting on him arriving later than he had -- his original plan had been to fly out the next evening -- and it seemed he'd caught his staff by surprise. This was unacceptable. In a minute he'd buzz his assistants and grill them about that, but first he needed a few minutes to focus. JC was finding it almost impossible to concentrate.

Part of the reason was because he had a headache, a huge, pounding thing that made his stomach roll and his eyes hurt. He could lay the blame for this at several doorsteps -- the regrettable amount of alcohol he'd ingested just before getting on the trans-Atlantic flight, the jet lag, the atrocious and undrinkable coffee they served in Antaeus's London office, and this interminable day, which had actually started three time-zones away, on the morning of the press's reception for the fall list.

And there was another reason, he thought bleakly, but he determinedly pushed it aside. He truly didn't have time to think about that, not right now.

JC rose from the desk, which was traditional and imposing, completely unlike his sleek and modern desk at the press, and turned to face the long row of windows, taking a deep breath and struggling to relax. The windows faced west, into the sunset, toward the ocean. Toward New York City.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the London skyline, dark against the brilliant colors of the sunset. Back at the press people would be just starting their work day. The phones would be ringing, meetings would be in progress, manuscripts would be opened for careful review. The reception the previous evening had been a great success and there were probably more than a few hangovers, he thought with a faint and humorless smile. He sighed, rubbing his forehead wearily. He certainly had one.

Although the pain in his head and the tension in his body were perhaps less from the alcohol than the after-effects of the incendiary -- and now, deeply troubling -- encounter with Justin in the darkness of the main floor's conference room. It was the vivid recollection of the sight of Justin's hair-roughened belly, the taste of his skin, the hoarse sound of his voice as he'd goaded, and then begged JC that had prevented him from sleeping or doing any work on the Lear flight to London. Even now he felt a slow flush of heat at the memory and clenched his jaw, muttering a tired curse.

He should be feeling huge amounts of self-disgust. The entire encounter had been wrong of him, so wrong on so many personal and professional levels that he almost couldn't stand to think about it. JC sighed, rolling his head back and forth on his neck and feeling the tight muscles stretch painfully. What on earth had happened to his reason, his sense of propriety, his self-control?

JC glanced over his shoulder, looking unenthusiastically at the pile of complex corporate documents. His eyes strayed to his laptop, open and humming efficiently at the side of the desk, and he fought the urge to check his e-mail. There was no reason to expect an e-mail from anyone at the press, he told himself sternly. And anything urgent could wait the hour he needed to get these documents in order. Besides, hadn't he just checked for messages ten minutes ago?

He returned grimly to his examination of the London skyline. This had to stop. He'd never felt so disjointed and out of control in his entire life, and it was utterly infuriating that one handsome young man, one bright and brilliant and disingenuous man could bring him to this level. It was unthinkable that he could allow himself to be affected this strongly, and it had to stop, immediately.

He hadn't wanted to come to London to deal with this acquisition, and if his grandfather hadn't insisted he would've put the closing date off and forced them to handle it without him, but now that he was here he could almost appreciate the distance. London was familiar and comforting; he'd spent a good many years here in school and working for the company. His brother had called and arranged to meet him the next evening, so he had family here. And he had friends as well, he remembered with a gradually dawning determination. The sort of friends that could help him forget the one person who was stubbornly refusing to be dislodged from his mind. Friends with benefits.

Turning his back on the darkening sky to the west, JC seated himself and bent determinedly to the papers. He would conquer this, he thought blackly. He would do the work he needed to do, and he would call Estella and see if she had plans on Friday, and he'd call Sean and see if he had plans on Sunday, and he would get through this week. Next week he was off to Italy, and then Spain, and he had friends in those places, too. And by the time he returned to New York his entire history with Justin would be a dim and uninteresting memory.

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Sean excused himself and JC leaned back against the luxurious leather upholstery of their booth, briefly closing his eyes. The jet lag seemed harder than usual to shake this trip; despite the short nap he'd had after the day's meetings, he still felt run down and tired. He couldn't even muster the energy to open his eyes and watch Sean walk across the restaurant -- a rewarding activity, and something he normally wouldn't miss. But JC's exhaustion went bone deep, and he acknowledged with a brief surge of anger and self-disgust that it was more than a physical tiredness, it was like a tiredness of his very soul.

He sat up and looked unenthusiastically at his half-finished meal. This was one of his favorite restaurants and he'd been looking forward to coming here for most of the day. Estella's housekeeper had reported that she was traveling in Africa, but Sean hadn't even tried to hide how happy he'd been to hear from JC. He'd even remembered how much JC liked this restaurant and had arranged to meet him here. This had pleased JC a great deal. It had been a nice change, JC thought cynically, from Justin's accusatory blue eyes, clipped, polite voice, and low, taunting words.

But he wasn't thinking about Justin tonight, he reminded himself firmly as he took another sip of the truly excellent French vintage. He forced himself back to the present in time to see

Sean returning to their booth, crossing the restaurant with that long, easy stride that had made him a fortune on runways across Europe. Other patrons paused in their conversations to stare as he passed, and JC watched him with appreciation from over the rim of his glass.

Sean slid into the booth across from JC and flashed a million dollar smile that made JC grin slowly in response. Sean's hair was longer than JC had ever seen it, barely curling at the very ends and hanging just below the collar of his shirt. It was perfectly cut and styled to look like it needed no style whatsoever, gleaming blue-black under the restaurant's expensive and subdued lighting. When they'd met at Oxford it had been cut very short, almost as short as Justin's hair was now, JC thought idly. He sighed, again pushing away the thought of Justin with an effort and focusing on the man across from him.

"It's so good to see you," Sean commented with an admiring glance at JC as he picked up his utensils and continued with his meal. "Really, JC, it's been too long."

His Irish accent had smoothed out considerably since their days at Oxford, but there was still enough there to be charming, and JC smiled at him as he reached over to refill Sean's wine glass. "I don't get out of New York City too much these days," he agreed, and Sean grinned at him, his teeth white and perfect.

"Or ever," he commented, and leaned closer. "It's been, what? Since January that you've been over here?"

"I think you're right," JC murmured with an effortless and lazy smile, his eyes intent on Sean's. "How nice of you to remember."

Sean's eyes were a deep mossy green, slightly tilted at the corners and breathtakingly beautiful this close up, a perfect contrast to his smooth skin and dark eyelashes. As different from Justin as could be, JC thought, and barely kept himself from grimacing.

Sean gave him a slow glance out of the corner of his eye, his full lips lifting slyly. "Well, you're easy to be nice to," he said quietly, and JC smiled as he leaned closer, watching Sean's eyes widen a little.

"I could say the same to you," he murmured. "And I've been looking forward to being nice to you all day."

"Only all day?" Sean returned with mock outrage. "Now, I'm hurt, JC. I've been thinking about you since I saw you last January. I kept telling my agent to get me some gigs in New York, but she just isn't cooperating."

JC laughed. "Well, you can't say you haven't been working," he commented with a smile. "I see your handsome face -- and body -- practically every time I pick up a magazine these days."

Sean grinned at him, leaning casually back so his ivory sweater outlined his perfect torso. "Yeah, business is good," Sean said agreeably. "I just got back from a two week shoot in Italy for Vogue . . ."

JC nodded attentively and tried to listen as Sean launched into a description of the photo shoots in Milan and Venice, his hopes for snagging the cover of GQ, a funny story about one of the photographers falling into the canal while perching precariously on the side of the gondola. Sean was a nice guy and had a way of telling an interesting story; he was certainly easy on the eyes, and JC knew from experience that he was a considerate and inventive lover.

But he could not keep his mind on the conversation, even as he encouraged Sean to keep talking, flirted with his eyes and smile and shifted closer in the booth. Such behavior came easily and naturally to JC, and he watched Sean respond to these preludes to seduction with an almost detached sort of interest. He was hot, he was gorgeous, he was someone JC had known for years and in whom he had a certain level of trust. He should be relaxing and enjoying the flirtation, the sure knowledge of where they would end up this evening. Instead, JC could not seem to stop cataloguing the differences between Sean and Justin.

Justin, he thought bleakly as Sean's voice faded to Irish-accented white noise, wouldn't be content to just sit across the table and talk. At any given meal that they'd shared, Justin had always been full of questions for JC -- he'd want to know all the details of his day, and how he was feeling and who he'd been talking to. And if Justin were here tonight he'd be asking questions about JC's meal, and offer to trade a little of his own slow roasted veal for a bite of JC's Cornish game hen. After three glasses of wine Justin's cheeks would be flushed and his blue eyes would be sparkling beneath his ridiculously long lashes. He'd be licking his full lips and casually sliding across the booth, gradually coming closer and closer. One more glass and he'd be reaching for JC's foot under the table, sandwiching it between his own and perhaps sliding his toe carefully up to JC's ankle and under the hem of his pant leg, all the while gazing innocently and earnestly across the table at him. He'd talk to JC about basketball, about his day at the press, about a new manuscript he was enthusiastic about, about any number of things . . .

". . . JC?" Sean's voce brought JC back to the here and now with a jolt. Sean's eyes narrowed thoughtfully over his smile and he cocked his head charmingly, attentively. "So," he started, "you haven't told me what's going on with Antaeus in New York? What's keeping you there full-time these days?"

Justin is, JC thought reflexively, and blinked in horror. "Oh, I thought I'd told you," he said casually, pushing at the remains of his meal. "I'm spending this year on one of the company's smaller subsidiaries. A press."

Sean's forehead knotted a little. "Like a newspaper?" he enquired incredulously, and JC shook his head.

"No, no. Phoenix Press," he explained. "We -- they -- publish books."

If anything Sean looked more puzzled. "Books?" he asked with confusion and more than a little scorn. "Isn't that kind of a waste of your talents?"

JC fought a surge of completely irrational irritation. He couldn't expect Sean to understand what publishing had come to mean to him, how proud he was of the press and the huge strides it had made this year, how excited he was at the reviews and the early sales projections for the fall list.

Sean wouldn't get it, and for a moment JC experienced a bitter disappointment. It would've been nice to talk to someone who understood his enthusiasm, who could share his pride, who would understand how difficult it was to be so far away from the press these days, to wrestle with deals and acquisitions that seemed rote and uninteresting to him now. Sean wasn't, JC realized with some dismay, someone he could really talk to about his life at this moment.

The thought that Justin would've understood without question came unbidden to JC's mind, and he tiredly pushed it away.

Sean lived in a different world, he didn't understand publishing, and that was just fine, JC thought with some determination. He wasn't all that interested in talking tonight anyway.

But now he'd missed something else that Sean was saying, and he wrenched his attention back to the conversation.

" . . . not really here with me," Sean was saying with a resigned and perfectly gorgeous little smile, his green eyes intent on JC's face.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" JC asked in some confusion, and Sean's smile widened.

"I was saying," he continued softly, "that I'm actually surprised it's a publishing press that has you so preoccupied. I was thinking that it wasn't a business, but maybe a person?" He tilted his head a little, questioning, kind. "Someone special?"

"What? No, no, nothing like that," JC said hastily. "Nobody like that." He slanted a seductive smile at Sean, gave it everything he had, but Sean was leaning back in his seat, his eyes sympathetic and disappointed.

"You're sure about that?" he asked quietly, and JC sighed.

"Yeah, I'm sure," he said shortly, and then rubbed his head. "I'm sorry, Sean. I think jet lag is still kicking me around here. It's not you, really."

"JC, it's no problem at all," Sean said, and leaned forward to place his hand over JC's as it rested on the table. His hand was long and slender, perfectly manicured and nothing at all like Justin's large, square hands, the hands that were always warm and had slightly ragged nails because he tended to bite them when he concentrated. JC had a sudden, vivid memory of sitting on Justin's huge, ugly couch, watching Justin frown at a manuscript as he absently nibbled at a thumbnail. His heart twisted unexpectedly and painfully, and he suppressed a vicious curse. He couldn't believe this.

Sean was offering to show JC his new penthouse, but JC knew that the opportunity was gone. "I'm sorry, Sean, but I think it would be best if I just head back to my own place," he said with honest regret. "I just don't have much energy tonight."

"No problem," Sean said easily. "Maybe give me a call next week, when you get back from Spain." His lips quirked in a sad smile. "If you feel like it."

"I'll do that," JC said as they rose from the table. But they both knew he wouldn't.

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Justin settled back in his chair, two feet down from where he and JC had stretched out only a few nights ago, but he wasn't thinking about that, not at all, and looked in annoyance at the representative from the e-text archive who'd come in that afternoon to pitch a proposal to Phoenix. He'd let them all know that he'd already spoken to some of Phoenix's authors on his own about doing second editions of their books on-line, which was just absolutely infuriating and almost unethical, in fact. This guy should have come to the press first, not tried to trap it into contracts by using authors and veiled threats as ammunition.

Justin cast a look across the table at Nick Carter, then had to concentrate to keep from smiling when Carter rolled his eyes in utter disgust. A quick glance at the rest of his colleagues revealed very similar expressions on their faces, and Justin came close to smiling again as affection for them spread over him. They were very good at what they did -- all of them -- and everyone in this room had figured out in five minutes flat that this guy was full of bullshit. Justin was suddenly very proud to work with them, proud to be among such smart, sharp people, and he was dying to hear how Elise Martin, in control of the meeting in JC's absence, would answer him. She was resting her chin in one graceful hand, sagging a little in her chair and giving the salesman a disbelieving stare. Justin didn't think he'd ever seen her slouch before -- truly, it was incredible.

Finally, the moment he'd been waiting for came: the salesman stopped, looked brightly at Elise, and said, "So, I'd love to hear what you think."

As Elise sat up straight again, stretching just a little, catlike and dangerous, anticipation filled the room. Elise was legendary for her set-downs, and Justin knew, he just knew, that she was about to deliver a stunner, something that he and everyone else would be quoting in the halls for days to come. The only person who could have done it better had been in Europe for the past several days, Justin thought, and then resolutely forced his attention back on Elise.

"What a . . . fascinating proposal you have for us, Mr. Rearden," she said smoothly, and everyone else held their breath and waited for it. But just as Elise opened her mouth, there was an urgent, annoying series of taps on the glass window outside -- it was Mark, JC's assistant, and he was gesturing almost frantically back and forth between the cell phone in his hand and Justin.

Everyone glared at Justin, who wanted to slide down his seat and into the floor -- anything to get the angry attention off of him, anything not to go answer that phone call. Given the look on Mark's face, there was no way in hell it could be good news.

"You want to go take that?" Elise said lightly, and Justin sighed, apologizing under his breath, grabbing his papers, and quickly heading out to where Mark was standing.

"I am so sorry," Mark mouthed, and then said out loud, "Call from Mr. Chasez."

"Okay," Justin said as alarm and excitement mingled in him in a thoroughly disturbing way. Why the hell was JC calling him? Hardly aware of what he was doing, he reached for the phone, brought it to his ear, and said, "This is Justin," in a rather unsure voice.

"Finally," JC snapped, and then said, "Hang on a minute, okay?" Justin sighed and nodded at Mark, then quickly strode down the hallway to his office. No way he was going to have this conversation in public. As he walked, he very nearly stumbled, because on his end of the line JC was saying something fast and definitive. And while Justin could tell from his voice that JC was doing exactly the same thing he often did here in the states -- namely, ordering people out of his office so he could have a private conversation -- the fact that JC was speaking in Italian, that JC was clearly confident and impatient, and that he was getting rid of these people so he could talk to Justin, Justin alone, was more than a little unsettling. It absolutely shouldn't have been as hot as it was, and when Justin reached his office, he closed the door and sank weakly into his chair.

"Okay, good," JC said in satisfaction, and Justin knew he was alone then, too. "I'm calling to ask about the third Brookner review."

"Um . . ." Justin had absolutely no idea what the Brookner review was.

"So has it arrived?" JC was impatient again, and Justin took a deep breath.

"Is this something I should have in my office? I'm sorry, but I'm kind of blanking on it."

"What? No. No, it's in my office; it should be in my mail, and it should have arrived today."

"Okay, okay," Justin said, trying desperately to buy time, because what the fuck? "Um. JC, I think this is probably something Mark could help you with a lot better, you know?"

"No, I don't know." Truly, JC was in a bad mood. "Mark doesn't know what he's looking for, and even if he did find it, he wouldn't be able to understand it. So I want you -- you to go in my office, look through my mail, find the review, and read it to me."

"Are you sure?" Justin asked even as he opened the door to his office and started to head back down the hallway. He paused for just a second to look wistfully into the conference room -- everyone in the room but the salesman was staring in rapt admiration at Elise -- before moving onward to the stairs and up to JC's office.

"What kind of question is that? Have I ever been unsure when I asked you for something?"

No, no he hadn't, Justin thought ruefully, his cheeks tingeing pink for just a moment, and then said, "Okay. I'm almost to your office, all right?"

"Good," JC said, and Justin heard him sigh. "Look. It's just -- I really want to know about this book."

"It's okay. I get it," Justin lied, and then nodded at Mark and headed into JC's office.

"All right, I'm here," he said. "I see a pile of mail on the corner of the desk." It was absolutely huge -- JC got a lot of mail.

"The reviewer's name is Wilson -- he's in Connecticut," JC said, and Justin, forgetting for a moment that JC couldn't see him, nodded and started flipping through the stack of envelopes.

"So things are going well there?" JC asked rather stiffly, and Justin very nearly smiled at the longing he heard in JC's voice. Apparently, working in publishing hadn't ended up being quite as boring JC had thought it would be.

"We're good, we're good," Justin said, glancing at letters from Barton, Mowrbry, and Fischer. "No emergencies, no big problems, nothing remarkable, really."

"Good."

JC fell silent, and Justin glanced at an ad from a typesetter, an issue of Publishers Weekly, the latest New Yorker, what appeared to be a manuscript, and letters from Fableson, Croft, and Gantwell. He was very near the end of the pile.

"Listen," JC said, and something in the tone of his voice made Justin put down the letters he was holding and stand perfectly still in the quiet, dark room. "What happened in the conference room, what happened between us --"

"JC, it's fine," Justin quickly said, flushing deeply and trying not to shiver as a delicious sense memory rolled over him, the feeling of JC's hair in his hands, the persistent, regular stroking of his tongue . . . "We really. There's no need to --"

"I just -- I should have handled it differently," JC said, and Justin couldn't for the life of him figure out whether JC meant that he shouldn't have done it at all or whether he should have done it in a different fashion.

"It's okay, and it's not going to -- I mean, I won't --" Justin faltered, and reached out anxiously to look at the next envelope in the stack. Wilson -- at long last, Wilson.

"Got it," he said happily, and JC made a sound of approval.

"Okay, so read it to me," he said. "Slowly, all right? You know how you get."

"All right," Justin said, fumbling with the envelope and ripping it badly in an effort to get it open. He was flushing again.

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Justin peered into his dark office and frowned as he saw his voice mail light flashing, then stepped in, flicked on the light, and turned his computer on, taking time to hang his coat while the machine booted. It was before seven and the rest of the press was mostly dark -- people might start coming in at 7:30, but other than JC, no one but Justin usually got here this early. Justin usually liked the quiet and the stillness of the early morning, liked knowing that he could work without being interrupted. It was also gratifying to have a handle on the day's work by the time everyone else came in.

But on this given morning Justin felt heavy and sluggish, and his thoughts were refusing to come together in coherent fashion. He'd woken up at an obscenely early hour, his body covered in sweat, his heart pounding, and a curse on his lips, because in the dream he'd been having, JC had been just about to -- he had been so close, and it had been so erotic, and --

At any rate, it had been impossible for Justin to go back to sleep after that, so he'd simply hopped out of bed, hurried to the bathroom, and taken a cold shower. And now he was here at Phoenix Press. As he typed in his computer password, Justin picked up a note pad and a pencil and grabbed his phone, yawning mightily. Once he listened to his voice mail, he'd head straight for the kitchen to make a pot of extra strong coffee.

Justin impatiently punched in his voice mail password, then frowned and tapped his pencil on the pad when he learned that he had four messages. That kind of thing never boded well, and Justin sat a little straighter in his chair in preparation as he started listening to the first one.

It was JC, his voice low and annoyed: "Justin, it's JC. I've been looking at the figures you gave me the other night, and I'm going to need more to work with, so I need you to send me the reprint figures from 1994 to 1999, as soon as you can. E-mail will be fine. "

Justin wrote down "1994-1999 -- e-mail" and then counted backward and widened his eyes a bit as he realized that JC had called him very, very late in the night. No wonder he was in such a rotten mood, and no wonder he was dealing out such horrible assignments. It was going to take a good long while to coax those reports out of the business office -- JC knew as well as anyone that Phoenix Press's record-keeping had been sketchy and erratic in the past, but JC was still somehow expecting Justin to produce this report quickly. Justin breathed in and out a couple of times and tried to calm down.

The second message was from a late reviewer promising to get his report in by the end of the day -- that, at least, was good news.

The third message was JC again; he'd left it hardly a half an hour after his first: "Normally I'd ask Mark to do this, but he's out today, so I need you to do this, and I need it to be done quickly: E-mail me the last couple of memos from your department -- no, wait. Look at the new project memos for the past several weeks and compile a shortlist of the projects everyone's bringing to the meeting next week. I want both summaries and features of the typescripts. Thanks. Oh -- and soon, all right? I have some interested people here and I don't have time to wait for this."

Justin scrawled "upcoming projects: summaries, page lengths" and groaned quietly. The memos were saved on the network, but he was going to have to try to remember who'd released what and when -- and he was pretty certain that there were at least ten of them in the past week alone. This was not only time-intensive, it was also not the kind of work he personally thought he should be doing. For a moment Justin seriously considered fobbing off the entire thing onto one of the other editorial assistants in the department, but at this point in time, Justin was more than a little wary of using someone else's work or collaborating in ways that might make JC suspicious. There was no way out of it: he now had a report to compile.

The final message was also from JC, and Justin groaned out loud as he listened to it. "Where are the reader's reports on the Smith manuscript, the one we talked about before I left? Pull them together, write up a summary, and send it to me. Now, Justin -- as soon as you hear this, because I told him I'd call him later today," JC said, his tone impatient and insistent.

"Asshole!" Justin breathed as he wrote "Smith! Now!" and then sat back in his chair and rubbed his forehead, trying somehow both to wake up and to figure out which of JC's immediate absolute priorities was the most absolute and the most immediate.

He finally decided to go with the Smith reports -- there would be no getting the financials until business came in, and he could get this task completed and in the mail to JC fairly soon. The Smith manuscript was technically Justin's -- he'd brought it in and he'd handled the review process -- but from the very start, JC had wanted to have his hands all over it, which was really pretty annoying. And the reviews weren't even in Justin's office -- they were with his assistant, so Justin had to wander out in the dark hallway and dig through the stack of manuscripts on his assistant's bookcase. After some time, he found what he needed, then stomped back into his own office, opened the folder, and began power-reading. If only he weren't so tired -- if only it weren't so early.

Half an hour later, Justin triumphantly dispatched his report to JC. He longed to rest, maybe to walk across the street to get a newly baked croissant and some coffee, but that was absolutely out of the question given the two urgent tasks he still had awaiting his attention. Justin called the sales department but got no answer. It was time to work on the shortlist, then.

One hour after that, Justin sent that report off as well, mumbling in annoyance as he watched other people starting to file in, their faces unconcerned, their energy undiminished. He'd been here hardly two hours, but he already felt as if he'd worked a half day. Scowling at his own bad luck, Justin called the business manager again -- this time, Betty was in, and she sounded none too pleased at his request.

"Justin, you know our record-keeping was pretty ragged back then -- I'm afraid all I could really give you for the mid nineties are some printouts."

"Wait, wait. There's nothing electronic? Nothing beyond that?"

"Sorry, but no," Betty said unhappily. "The person who worked here back then got fired and deleted a bunch of stuff when he left, which really messed things up for us."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Look -- this is a report for JC, okay? I need to get this out as quickly as I can."

"Well, '98 to the present is on the network, but you're going to have to come down here and get the files for the earlier stuff," Betty told him, and it was only with greatest difficulty that Justin was able to respond in a polite, even tone.

Half an hour later, he sat at his desk in front of a series of half-assed documents and swore out loud. There was nothing here -- virtually nothing to work from, and what he did have was going to need to be entered into the machine anew. Justin glanced out of his office and at his own assistant, but he looked harried and unhappy, and it wasn't right to foist off this kind of thing anyway. He was going to have to plow through this one on his own.

An hour later, Justin scowled at the rudimentary spreadsheet taking form on his machine. His head was throbbing and fuzzy, and his office felt hot and airless. The figures he'd assembled

weren't good enough, weren't specific enough, but JC was just going to have to understand, because it had been hard as hell even to get to this point. At least he would now be able to merge this document with the later figures -- if, that is, everything worked out. Justin lifted his head and groaned as the scent of coffee wafted down the hallway. He hadn't had any yet this morning -- that was probably why his head was pounding. In an instant, Justin was on his feet and stumbling toward the door. This was ridiculous; he deserved at least a single cup of coffee.

When he returned from the kitchen, Justin saw that his voice mail light was on again, and for a second or two, he wondered whether it might not just be best to ignore it altogether. But Justin wasn't the kind of person who could ignore messages, so he tiredly reached over to key in his password.

The minute he heard JC's voice, he regretted it, and as the message came through -- "Justin, I asked you to send those figures as quickly as you could. It's almost four o'clock here, and I can't wait much longer -- I have a meeting at 5, and I need those figures. Now. Call me."

Justin set down his coffee and glanced in panic at his screen, then began trying to figure out how to do the merge he wanted, swearing quietly to himself as he realized that it wasn't going to work -- he was either going to have to cut and paste in laborious fashion or find someone else in the damn place who knew how to do it. He phoned the press's IT guy, left an impatient voice mail message of his own, and then sagged in his chair, his head spinning.

Justin didn't even let the phone complete its first ring when it sounded to his left. "Do you know how to do it?" he asked urgently. "Did you figure it out? I have a very important report due."

There were two beats of utter silence, and Justin closed his eyes in dread.

"So it's not going to be done in time, is it?" JC said, his voice cool and disapproving.

"JC, I'm trying, but it's a little complicated," Justin said. "You have to realize --"

"What I realize is that you've had all morning to do this and you still haven't come through," JC said, and something in Justin snapped.

"Listen, JC," he hissed. "I came in here to three messages from you, three messages about three really complicated things, and now it's only a couple of hours later and I'm already two for three, so frankly, I think I'm not doing all that badly, okay? And as far as the financial stuff goes, do you have any idea how fucking disorganized they are in the business department? Do you have the slightest sense of how screwed up those records are? Cause I'm thinking that's the department that needs your attention. Not mine. Not me."

"I'm aware of what's going on down there. Your concern, however, is not with that department. Your concern is to get me the information I need."

"I can't, JC -- that's what I'm trying to tell you! The best I can do right now is '98 and '99 -- I could send you that right now -- but if you want more, I'm sorry, but it's going to have to wait. At least until I drink my first damn cup of coffee of the day."

There was a short silence after that. Finally, JC said, "So things are busy there?"

"Yes, JC. Just a little."

"Yes. Well. I got the other two reports. Thank you for sending them."

"You're welcome," Justin said, adjusting his tone a little bit.

JC sighed. "Look. If I ask you for impossible things, it's because I know you can deliver, I know that you almost always come through for me. I guess -- I didn't think it through when I asked you for the early figures, and for that, I apologize."

Justin took a deep breath. "Uh. Thanks. It's okay. I just -- bad morning, you know?"

"I'm actually working on an entire bad day here -- one meeting after another, all of them useless," JC said. "And it's difficult to sit here and talk about conglomerates in the abstract when I know for a fact that there are specific, useful things I could be doing at Phoenix, things that will have a direct effect. I don't have much time left to achieve what I need to at the press, and so it makes me a little . . . impatient."

Justin bit his lip. "I'm -- I can send you the partial figures right now if that'd help."

JC sighed. "Yeah, go ahead and do that, I guess. Look -- can you do me a favor? I need you to talk to Chris, ask him a couple of things about the layout for the catalog."

"Is this an emergency too?" Justin asked as the annoyance started to spread over him again. "Because I don't think --"

"Okay, okay, no," JC said, and shocked the hell out of Justin by laughing a bit. "I've probably pushed you enough for one morning. Just -- transfer me to Chris. I'll leave him a voice mail for a change."

"I like that idea," Justin said, and JC laughed again, this time sounding much less tense and much less unhappy.

"All right," Justin said, staring doubtfully at the phone. "I'm going to do what I think will transfer you, but I'm not entirely sure --"

"You don't know how to use your own phone?" JC could not hide his incredulity. "You've worked here for how long?"

"It is not that easy," Justin said huffily, but not without a certain amount of amusement.

"Do we need to have phone classes?" JC teased, and Justin smiled in surprise.

"Tell me you know how to use your phone, JC. Tell me you understand every last button on it," he challenged, and there was a low chuckle on the other end.

"I'm not saying I wouldn't attend the class myself," JC admitted, and then they both laughed, a moment Justin let stretch out as long as he dared before finally saying, "All right.

Transferring you now, Mr. Chasez."

"Thanks, Justin," JC quietly said, and Justin pressed the button and keyed in Chris's extension.

He knew that he should spring into immediate action now, should pull together the part of the report that he did have and get it in the mail to JC, but for some reason, Justin needed just to sit very still in his chair for a moment.

JC was leaving in just a month or so. Justin had known this already -- everyone had -- but this was the first time he'd heard JC talk about it so forthrightly, and certainly the first time he'd heard him express regret about it. What would the press do without JC? He'd come in with so many great ideas, and it seemed a shame to lose him before he'd even begun to implement them. It made no sense for him to leave.

And, Justin had to admit, there were other, more private reasons he didn't want JC to leave. Now that he knew that JC had not, in fact, been the jerk he'd thought he'd been with regard to Joey, he was feeling . . . a little differently about some things -- certainly less angry at JC, and possibly also -- well. It was hard to think too closely about these things, particularly on a morning like this, but Justin could admit to himself now that as annoying and difficult as working with JC could be, it was still nothing but a pleasure to watch him move, to feel the warmth of his eyes and his smile, to be close to him and remember how he smelled or sounded when he was in much more intimate contexts. Truly, it would be a shame to lose all that, and it would be a shame as well to lose any chance at, well, maybe fixing things. Some things. But that would require time, and time, JC seemed to be saying, was something they didn't have very much of right now.

Okay, this line of thought was starting to become depressing. Justin forced himself to sit upright, quickly rubbed his bloodshot eyes, and attacked the financial report one last time.

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JC had finally returned from Europe. Justin would've known this even if he hadn't been hearing from him fairly regularly via telephone -- he could feel the subtle but definite difference in the atmosphere at the press when he'd finished his early conference call and walked down the hall to search for caffeine. It was still early, but instead of milling about chatting and getting coffee, people were already down to business. Justin passed an unusually silent row of cubes containing people bent attentively to their work and suppressed a smile. Not only was JC back from Europe, he thought with amusement, he'd obviously already made his presence known. He'd probably been the first one in the building this morning.

Justin returned to his desk and checked his email, finding the not-unexpected summons to a brief manager's meeting at 10:00. He made a wry face at his monitor -- of course JC would want a meeting, of course he'd want to be brought up to date on every little thing. Joey hadn't been wrong when he'd called JC a micromanager all those months ago, Justin thought soberly as he started making a list to prepare for the meeting. Justin had the feeling that JC had worked very, very hard while he was away, doing god only knew what sort of complicated global tycoonish things, but Justin also had the distinct impression that JC's attention had not veered from his work at the press very much at all.

And, Justin forced himself to admit, Joey had been wrong in thinking that the press hadn't needed the sort of detailed scrutiny JC brought to the table. The difference in the spring list's sales figures and the preliminary figures for the fall list had set that complaint to rest forever. Justin felt an unsettling mixture of pride and guilt over that admission, and pushed it aside to prepare for the meeting.

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"Okay, that's all for now," JC said quietly. "Thank you everybody."

There was a minor commotion as everyone got to their feet and gathered up their materials. The meeting hadn't been as brief as Justin had hoped, and when he stood up from his chair the twinge in his lower back made him grimace. He raised his arms and stretched to the side to work out the tightness, and froze as he became aware of JC's eyes on him. His heart stuttered and he dropped his arms abruptly, risking a glance to the head of the table where JC was rising to his feet.

But he wasn't even looking at Justin, he saw with a confusing mixture of relief and disappointment. He must have imagined those blue eyes sliding over his body, bright and warm as an actual caress . . .

With a sigh Justin grabbed his folders and pen and headed for the conference room door, holding it open with a smile for Elise as she exited.

"Justin!" she said with a big smile as they walked through the door, turning to face him as he paused. He was aware of JC coming out the door just as she said: "Emily said she saw you having lunch with Joey last week. I've been thinking about him -- how is he doing?"

Justin hesitated as JC came to a stop in the hallway beside them, forming a bizarre and suddenly tense triangle. Elise continued to look inquiringly at him and Justin gathered himself with a quick breath.

"He's doing really well," he said with a smile. "Told me specifically to tell you he said hello."

Elise beamed at him and patted Justin's arm as she passed. "Oh, he's such a good guy. Tell him hi when you talk to him again," she tossed over her shoulder and rounded the corner, leaving Justin alone with a very silent JC.

It was the first time he'd faced him since the night of the reception, and with memories of their last encounter in the conference room suddenly vivid in his mind, Justin cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Um, yeah. Did I mention that I had lunch with Joey last week?" Justin asked weakly. JC's eyes were very clear and very steady on Justin's face, and as he watched him, JC slowly lifted an eyebrow.

"That must be the lunch you were going to tell me about now, in my office. Right? " he countered politely, and Justin hesitated before nodding.

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. "If now's a good time."

"It's a good time," JC said mildly, and motioned for Justin to precede him up the stairs and into his office, where he shut the door quietly behind them.

Justin tried to keep from looking but he couldn't stop himself from hungrily examining JC as he walked over to his desk and set down his materials. JC didn't look like he'd spent the last two weeks traveling and doing huge, important and stressful things. In fact, Justin thought, his eyes narrowing slightly, JC looked rested, utterly composed, and maybe even like he'd been out in the sun. In other words, he looked fabulous and Justin felt a moment of complete, savage regret and bitterness at all the things that kept them apart.

"So," JC was saying, standing with his back to the corner windows and regarding Justin steadily. "I don't want you to think that I'm keeping tabs on your personal comings and goings," he said dispassionately. "But if you've been in touch with a former employee, naturally I'm interested."

"Naturally," Justin echoed stiffly. He tightened his grip on the folders and pad of paper in his slightly sweaty hands. "Well, I haven't talked to Joey since he left," he continued quietly, "but he returned my call finally, and we had lunch."

The only thing that betrayed JC's tension was a brief and very slight clenching of his jaw. His eyes were cool and remote, his hands relaxed on top of his desk as he eased himself into his chair. Justin shifted uneasily and wondered what it would be like to have such complete control over one's emotions and reactions.

"I know Joey has a job with another press," JC started with deceptive casualness, and Justin looked up sharply to meet his eyes.

"Yes, yes he does," he murmured, and watched JC's eyes narrow on him. "A job that seems to suit him very, very well," he continued guilessly.

"Good to hear," JC murmured noncommittally, and Justin felt a surge of satisfaction. JC didn't know what, or how much, Justin knew about his role in obtaining Joey's new job. For once, JC wasn't able to read him. It felt good.

"I know that he took some of his authors with him," JC continued quietly, and Justin stepped closer to the desk to hear him over the hum of the ventilation. "I am assuming that the loss wasn't significantly damaging to our list," he said, watching Justin carefully. "And that you would've told me if it was."

"No, it wasn't." Justin took a deep breath and ignored the veiled insult. "In fact, I think the ones that left -- their books are much better off at a scholarly press. It's better for everyone all around." Especially Joey, he thought, but didn't say it.

JC regarded him steadily, his eyes sharp and so blue it almost hurt to look into them. There was a slight golden tinge to his skin, like he'd spent some time outdoors recently, and the sight of his smooth jaw and the soft skin of his neck made Justin almost helpless with

longing. He felt a moment of pure misery and hopelessness -- was he always going to feel this way around JC? Would these feelings ever go away?

"Like I said," JC said softly as he leaned forward in his chair. "Your social life isn't any of my business." Justin took a swift breath at the unexpected stab of pain JC's words caused, and JC continued like he hadn't noticed. "I need to know if Joey is trying to entice anyone else over to NYU. And Justin, I suggest you be very candid with me on this."

For a moment Justin's mind went blank; he couldn't imagine what JC was getting at. JC's steady stare discomposed him and he felt himself flushing. "I think the authors who would be interested in following Joey to NYU have already gone," he said slowly. "I don't think there will be any more, and none of the ones remaining are really central to the next list, although Daniel Reed has a very interesting manuscript on . . ."

"I believe you know that that's not what I meant," JC interrupted softly, and Justin gulped.

"*Oh*," Justin said, and shifted uneasily. "Okay, no. He didn't say anything about me moving over to NYU. I think it's because Joey knows that I already spent a year at Harvard, and I'm not really interested in going back to that sort of publishing. And really," he added quietly, his eyes on the floor, "I have too much, uh, personally invested in Phoenix to leave now." Justin switched his folders from one sweaty hand to the other and waited miserably for JC to bring up Justin's taunts about job hunting from their last face-to-face meeting.

"That's what I needed to know," was all JC said, his voice calm and almost uninterested. "Thank you," he continued formally. "I'm sorry I held you up, I know you have a very busy day today."

It was a dismissal, although perhaps one of the more polite ones JC had handed to him. Justin nodded in what he hoped was a businesslike fashion, and headed out the door.

November

November

"I just wanted to let you know how deeply disappointed I am with this press and the way it's handled my book," Robert Santorelli said, his voice taut and unhappy in JC's ear, and JC tightened his grip on the phone and leaned back in his chair as fury and alarm churned inside him. Robert Santorelli had been one of Joey's authors. When JC had reviewed Joey's projects shortly after firing him, Santorelli's manuscript had been one of the few that he had decided to keep, mostly because it had seemed to be both an important work of scholarship and to have the potential for a broader audience. However, the first round of reviews Justin had commissioned (Joey had simply sat on the manuscript for months without sending it out at all, which had occasioned the author's first blow-up) had been lukewarm, and when discussing them with Justin, JC had advised him to let the book go.

Justin hadn't agreed -- his eyes wide and his face intent, he'd launched into a passionate explanation of why this book was still important to the press and why it was worth offering the author the chance to revise. JC had tried to hear him out, but as he'd listened, he'd felt himself becoming increasingly tense -- angry, even. Even though Joey Fatone was no longer an employee of Phoenix, it seemed that Justin was still trying to cover for him and his half-assed authors, was still showing the same blind loyalty to someone who deserved none of it. The fact that Justin was more devoted to someone JC had fired for incompetence than to his own director and his own press had made JC's blood boil, and it had been frighteningly difficult to control his displeasure and his hurt as he'd responded to Justin's arguments. Finally JC had snapped, cutting Justin off midsentence and abruptly ending the conversation by calmly and quietly saying, "Justin, I don't want to have to speak to you about this again. Tell him we can't afford to publish it, tell him your director overruled you, send him to NYU press -- do it however you want to, but get rid of this book, and do it now."

Justin had been flushed and angry, but he'd agreed -- or so JC had thought -- to reject the manuscript, and in JC's mind, the issue had been closed. But Robert Santorelli obviously hadn't gotten that news, and now JC was faced with the unpleasant realization that yet again Justin had gone behind his back, yet again, he was acting in clandestine fashion to thwart JC's express wishes. As he listened to Santorelli raging on, JC tried without success to keep his feelings under control. It was quite simply unbelievable that Justin hadn't learned by now not to try to deceive him, that he was still unable to be forthright and honest. JC bit his lip, murmuring something noncommittal to Santorelli and fighting the fresh pain and disappointment as he tried to come to terms with the fact that he probably wasn't going to be able to trust Justin. He had expected so much more from him -- he had wanted so much.

As Santorelli went on about the years of careful research he'd devoted to this project, JC listened as patiently as he could, but god, this man was tiresome, accusatory and unpleasant, and his displeasure with Justin bloomed anew as JC suffered through it. What he wanted was to get rid of this man and his book once and for all right here, but it would be bad for the

house if he revealed that its acquiring editors were not in communication with the director, beyond embarrassing to have to admit that his editors were ignoring his own advice. No matter how annoying Santorelli was, JC couldn't say anything definitive about this until after he'd talked to Justin.

But that didn't mean that JC had to listen to his bullshit.

"Mr. Santorelli, it's important to me to speak to you knowledgeably about your book," JC said quickly and smoothly on the first occasion Santorelli stopped to breathe, and then, when the other man began to protest again, continued talking over him. "And to that end, I'd like to sit down with the manuscript and discuss it with Justin Timberlake before we conclude this conversation. Will you be around this afternoon? I'll call you back then."

Santorelli sputtered a little in surprise, but after JC stolidly refused to take up further conversational gambits and simply continued repeating his offer, he finally capitulated, and the two of them agreed that JC would call him again later in the day. Once he hung up the phone, JC immediately punched in Justin's phone number, then swore under his breath when the call rolled over to David, Justin's assistant.

"I need to speak to Justin immediately," JC said firmly but not, he thought, impolitely, but there were still a few moments of horrified silence as David realized both that he was speaking to the director and that the director was not pleased.

"Mr. Chasez, I'm very sorry but he's out today," he finally, miserably said, and JC clenched his jaw.

"Well, where is he? I spoke with him just yesterday, and he seemed fine then."

"Sir, no, uh, he was going -- I'm sure you remember -- the press sent him to the book festival down in Washington DC with Thomas Kearney for a couple of days," David said uncertainly. "He'll be back the day after tomorrow."

"Oh," JC said as embarrassment flooded him, because he should have known that, particularly since he was the one who had insisted that Justin go. "Thank you. Listen -- do you have the Santorelli files? I need to look at them."

"They're on his desk right now -- he's got them all spread out and --"

"Bring them to me as soon as you can. Thank you," JC said, and then hung up and turned once more to the manuscript he had been scanning just before Santorelli had called. Earlier, it had seemed intriguing, but as he stared at the pages now, all JC could see or think about was Justin, Joey, and Robert Santorelli.

Part of him wanted to call Justin's cell phone -- although he'd pulled the number up more than once right after the breakup with the express intent of deleting it, JC hadn't had the heart to actually go through with it -- and demand an explanation. Maybe that would help JC to figure out whether his immediate instinct, which was to demote Justin right away and start a search for a new manager for the music department -- if, that is, he decided to keep the department at all -- was worth following.

And yet he was strangely reluctant to harm either Justin or his department, which made JC furious with himself. If an employee of his at Antaeus had deceived him and acted in direct defiance of his wishes, JC wouldn't have hesitated more than a second or two to fire him. But as he stared grimly at the manuscript, JC knew he wasn't going to be able to do that to Justin -- not without looking more closely at the matter first, and not without figuring out what was going on in Justin's head.

JC sighed, the sound loud in the silence of his office. Justin had changed him profoundly, and probably not for the better -- for wasn't he now, in his own way, trying to protect Justin in exactly the same way Justin had tried to protect Joey? The thought was so unpleasant that JC immediately banished it from his mind.

Really, it was unbelievable that Justin had acted in this fashion after what had gone on with the five year plan. And the saddest thing of all was that during the past few weeks, JC had almost started to allow himself to believe that things were maybe starting to settle between them a little bit -- that there might be a chance, however remote, that he and Justin --

JC cut that thought off viciously as well. Yet again, he was acting like a fool -- yet again, he was letting his confusing, conflicted feelings about Justin get the better of him. Despite his best efforts to gain control of himself, JC was still flailing and helpless when it came to Justin. God, it was humiliating, and it seemed that the only way to free himself of it was simply not to see or talk to Justin Timberlake anymore. Really, his final months at Phoenix Press couldn't pass quickly enough.

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The file David brought in was bulging, and JC grimaced in distaste as he looked at it. David had carelessly reassembled it in his haste to deliver it, and as JC began to sort through the mountain of correspondence, he groaned. This was going to take considerable effort. As he looked carefully through the mess, JC's scowl deepened -- as he'd thought, Justin had initiated an extra round of revision and review.

But how had he come to the decision, and how had he implemented it? Flipping impatiently to the middle of the file, JC located the point at which he'd dropped out of the conversation and then scanned one printed-out e-mail after another in which Justin urged Santorelli to take his and the reviewers' suggestions to heart, comments that Santorelli had inevitably responded to in a defensive, dismissive fashion. Despite himself, JC found himself nodding in approval as he read Justin's replies: Santorelli had been nothing but unpleasant, and several times had verged into plain rudeness, but without fail, Justin's responses had been courteous and even: he had continued to disagree with and argue with the author, but he had done so in a consummately professional fashion. Had these letters not been written in the service of a task JC had forbidden Justin to undertake, JC would have felt proud of him.

But Justin had been insubordinate and deceitful -- again -- and it was such a waste, because really, Justin was so talented. JC shook his head and flipped to the final letter in the file -- the one that had no doubt prompted the call JC had received from Santorelli today. In it, Justin had finally politely but firmly rejected the manuscript, wishing Santorelli good luck with his future endeavors and suggesting that he send it to Joey at NYU.

Which, of course, he should have done to begin with, JC thought darkly, and then slammed the file shut and began to brood.

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When Mark knocked on his door fifteen minutes later, JC had not yet moved, and it was with effort that he slowly pulled himself together and said "Come in."

As Mark approached his desk, JC wrinkled his brow in concern: he was red-faced and anxious, and the hand he extended to JC -- the one holding a manila folder -- was trembling a little bit.

"What's wrong?" JC asked as kindly as he could, but that made Mark even more uncomfortable; he anxiously shifted his weight back and forth and muttered, "Oh god. Okay. Uh, look. It seems -- well. You were just talking to David about the Santorelli manuscript, right?

JC looked hard at Mark, then slowly took the folder and placed it on his desk, wondering bleakly whether he and David had just been complaining about what an asshole he'd been this morning. Usually such things didn't bother JC -- usually he didn't think about them at all. It was a measure of how preoccupied he was with Justin's latest behavior that he was even considering this, JC realized, and forced himself to speak in a measured, quiet tone.

"Yes, I was. "

"Okay. Um, in that folder," Mark said, then broke off and took a few deep breaths.

Really, he looked almost ill, and JC couldn't stand it any longer. "Mark, for god's sake, please just tell me before you faint." He hazarded a small and hopefully reassuring smile.

Mark waved his arms frenetically for a moment, then spilled it out in a long rush.

"Okay. So in that folder is a memo from Justin to you -- he gave it to me weeks ago when you were in Europe and I put it under something else on my bookshelf and planned to give it to you later but I must have forgotten, and anyway, when David mentioned Santorelli, it reminded me and you should have had it weeks ago and I'm very, very sorry. And it won't happen again."

JC sat back in his chair and fought with every cell in his body not to start reading the memo that very second -- Mark's face now resembled a large, misshapen beet, and the first thing he needed to do was take steps to calm him down.

"Obviously, Mark, I don't like the fact that this memo wasn't delivered to me, but in the past year you've been nothing but efficient and organized. Sometimes, these things just happen, and it’s all right. Really."

Mark let out a long, shuddering sigh, and then said, "Again, so sorry. I won't -- it won't --"

JC smiled again. "Go sit down. It's all right."

"I, right. Yeah," Mark said, and practically bolted from the office. The instant he was gone, JC opened the folder. As he noted the date of the memo, JC stiffened in shock as a powerful wave of relief hit him. It had been written shortly after his conversation with Justin about terminating the contract. Justin really had tried to talk to him before proceeding with the extra revision and review. The memo read:

JC:

Following our conversation of yesterday I thought carefully about your advice to terminate the Santorelli contract and reject the manuscript, and I wanted to share with you my continuing opinion, as acting manager of the music department, that we should allow this author to revise. Attached are sales figures for his other books with Phoenix as well as copies of reviews those books received. As you look at them you will see that critical response has been unfailingly positive, and that Santorelli's books have earned far more money than most of Phoenix's musicology titles have done.

Beyond that, however, I feel it necessary to note that this current manuscript did not receive the attention it should have from the editor who originally handled it. None of this would have happened had that editor taken the time to closely review this book and offer suggestions for revision before we sent it out for the initial review. When I took over the project, it had already been sitting untouched for months, and the author was, as you know, demanding an immediate response from the press, so I sent it out for reviews without taking that extra step with him in hopes that it would help ameliorate our relationship.

As a result, the manuscript that I had reviewed did not get the attention it should have from Phoenix Press, and I think that at this point, the only fair thing we can do, both for this book and for this author, is to give him the opportunity to attempt to produce the sort of book we would like to see. I am not suggesting that we push the project through despite the poor reviews but merely that the press and the music department attempt to make up for past negligence by doing the right thing for the author and the book at this juncture.

Therefore, I propose that we proceed with a final revision and review. I will look at the text the way it should have been studied before and work with the author to see if this book can, as his other works have, be a positive addition to the music list.

I am quite sure that you will want to discuss this further, so I will wait until you return from Europe to proceed on the above. If I do not hear from you then, however, I will move forward.

Thanks,

Justin

JC read the memo twice, then quietly placed it in the folder and leaned back in his chair, eyes falling shut as he considered the significance of what Justin had written. This was no replay of the five-year-plan fiasco. This time, instead of protecting Joey, Justin had demonstrated a clear-eyed understanding of where he had gone wrong, and Justin hadn't tried to shy away from it or to explain it away; instead, he'd simply tried to fix the problem. And unlike JC, he hadn't gotten distracted by anger and resentment; unlike JC, he'd been thinking first and

foremost of what was best for the press and for this particular manuscript. From start to finish, Justin had acted with integrity.

Thank god he hadn't called Justin and revealed the immaturity and fury of his own first response, JC thought with considerable relief, and then very nearly laughed out loud at himself.

But why not be honest? The real reason he was happy right now was that Justin had come to him, that he had obviously taken JC's directive seriously even though he had disagreed with it. He had had courage enough to challenge JC's decision, and he'd done it in a reasonable, professional fashion. He had, in short, shown himself to be everything JC had once thought he was.

It was wonderful news, though JC couldn't help but wince as he thought about it. If Justin were really who JC thought he was, then the fact that he no longer had him became even more unbearable, because JC missed that Justin so much it hurt. And if that Justin were still here, then in breaking off their relationship, he had ruined far more than he'd known.

These thoughts were far too dangerous. JC abruptly raised his head, opened his eyes, and then cleared his mind and reached for the phone to call Santorelli.

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Usually Justin didn’t mind working when the press was all but deserted -- he found it easier to concentrate with fewer distractions and had learned that the early mornings and evenings could be his most productive times. But tonight the silence was beginning to feel oppressive even to him, and when Justin’s telephone rang he pushed the pile of reviews away and grabbed the phone with something like relief.

"Justin, honey," came his mother’s voice in response to his greeting, and Justin leaned back in his chair with a smile. "I can’t believe you’re still at work!"

"I’m very busy and important," he informed her sternly. "A busy and important man’s work is never done."

She sighed heavily. "Well, I tried your apartment first, and when you didn’t answer I thought ‘Oh, he’s out doing something fun, just leave a message on his cell!’ But I knew better. I knew I’d find you at your desk, even at 8:30 on the night before Thanksgiving." She was teasing him but underneath her voice sounded so sad. Homesickness hit him like a hard punch to the gut, and Justin’s smile faded.

"I’m so sorry I can’t come home, Mama," he said softly. "I miss you so much." Guilt added itself to homesickness when he heard her sniffle a little bit, and he sighed. "I hate not being there, you know that."

"Oh, honey, I know," Lynn said, making an obvious effort to pull herself together. "And I really didn’t call to make you feel bad; I just hate to think of you all by yourself in New York City for Thanksgiving."

"Well, you know, it just didn't make sense. I couldn't get a flight out until tomorrow afternoon; I would've missed dinner and then would've had to turn around and come right back. And you know, it's not that bad here," Justin said, glancing out his office door to the dark and silent hallways beyond. "It's nice and quiet, so I'm getting all kinds of work done, and I'm going to take most of the weekend off."

"Well, that's remarkable," his mother said with amusement.

"And I won't be by myself tomorrow, either," Justin continued. "I told you Joey and his wife invited me over for dinner and to watch football, so I'll probably head over there for the day."

"Well, that's not so bad," he mother conceded sadly. "I'm glad you're spending time with your friends. Don't mind me, I think I'm just feeling sorry for myself because I won't see you again until Christmas."

"It's only a month away," Justin offered softly. "And I'm sorry I can't make it, believe me. I think I had a dream about Grandma's cobbler last night." He smiled a little as his mother giggled. "And it would be good to see everyone."

"Everyone is right. You know what a mob scene it'll be at your grandparents'," his mom said, and now she was smiling. "And you know how your grandmother cooks. I've been fasting all week to get ready."

Justin laughed. His entire extended family lived in and around Memphis -- holidays truly were mob scenes, and even when they all showed up hungry his grandmother still prepared far too much food. They'd be eating left-over turkey and mashed potatoes until Christmas, he thought fondly.

They talked for a little while about more general things, and Justin promised to call his grandparents, and whatever other relatives happened to be near their kitchen phone, the next day before dinner. When he replaced the receiver it seemed even darker and colder in the silent press, and Justin sighed sadly.

He was just debating whether to flee his mausoleum of an office and take his work home, or grit his teeth and stay another two hours to finish it when he heard footsteps running down the hallway toward his office. He barely had time to glance up before one of the art department's interns burst through his doorway, flushed and wild-eyed with panic.

"Oh god," she blurted, out of breath and trembling. "Oh god, Justin, I mean, Mr. Timberlake, I'm so sorry, I am so, so, sorry . . ."

Justin started to rise to his feet, alarm sparking through him. "What? What's wrong?"

The girl -- he thought her name was Jennifer -- juggled a FedEx package in her arms as she pressed a trembling hand to her chest. "This package had to go out tonight, but it was already so late they told me to take a cab, and the cab got stuck in traffic and I got out and ran but I still couldn't make it and I know it had to go out and now everybody is gone . . ."

"Easy," Justin said in as soothing a voice as he could manage. "Jennifer, stop. Just take a deep breath, and tell me what's in the package."

Jennifer took a deep, trembling breath and let it out. "I'm sorry," she said weakly, her voice thick with tears, and Justin resisted the urge to pat her shoulder. "I'm sorry, it's been a really, really bad day."

The tears spilled over and one plopped on the FedEx package as Justin groped for a tissue. "Hey," he said in a deceptively calm voice. "Jennifer, it's okay. There are very few things in this business that can't be fixed, you know? Just, um, calm down." Please, he added silently. Please let it be something that can be fixed. Please don't start crying in my office.

Jennifer took another deep breath and made a valiant effort to pull herself together, and Justin felt a surge of pity. She was just a kid, barely out of high school and in her first semester at art college, interning for Chris's art department.

"It's this cover," she started, her voice trembling. "They've been fighting over it all week. Chris and Nick and then the author came in to see it and said no, he wanted something completely different, and the deadline was yesterday but the guy at the press said if we get the final to him first thing Monday morning," she said, "like, before 9:00 Monday morning, it'll be okay. But if it's not in final by then, then it won't make the printing deadline. And the author pitched a fit and was demanding to speak to JC but he'd left already . . ."

Left? Justin thought inanely and inappropriately. JC was gone? Where would he go? Wasn't his family all in New York City? Did people that rich even know how to cook turkey? Maybe they'd all gone away somewhere fabulous and exotic for Thanksgiving. Somewhere warm, he thought, Jennifer's anxious voice fading to a faraway drone as his mind supplied an image of JC lounging on a beach somewhere tropical and beautiful. He jerked himself back to the conversation at hand with horror. What on earth was wrong with him?

". . . called Chris and he was already at the airport, heading for Florida, and he said to overnight it to JC for Friday delivery, and to tell him to call him because Chris couldn't reach him on his cell, but then traffic was so bad and . . ."

"Okay," Justin said soothingly. "It's okay, Jennifer, you did your best. None of this is your fault."

Her brown eyes swam with tears. "Nick said he'd wait until I called to tell him that I'd made the FedEx drop," she said pathetically, "but he didn't, he's already gone, and he doesn't answer his cell phone and everyone is gone except you and, and, and now I don't know what to do."

Justin sighed and smiled as reassuringly as he could. "Give it to me," he said. "Where's it going?"

She sniffled pathetically, still gripping the package. "Somewhere in Connecticut."

Connecticut? Interesting. "Well, it shouldn't be too hard to get a courier to take it there first thing Friday morning," he said calmly, and handed Jennifer another tissue. "I'll get in touch

with JC and tell him what happened today, and get a courier to take it to him." He smiled at her, holding out his hand for the package. "Okay?"

She blinked at him and slowly loosened her grip on the box. "Nick told me it was my responsibility to get that package out," she said sadly. "But I'm supposed to be on a plane home in two hours and I didn't know what . . ."

"To do," Justin supplied helpfully. "So you brought it to me, and I'll take care of it, Jennifer, okay? I will, you can count on me to deal with it." He tried another smile, hands still outstretched. "It'll be okay, I promise."

She gave the box up with a sigh. "I'm so sorry," she said piteously.

"Hey, it's okay," Justin said, making his tone cheerful and kind. "Don't worry about it. Go catch your flight, and don't give this another thought. Where are you headed?"

She gulped noisily and gave him a watery smile. "Chicago. I'm going home to see my family."

He smiled back, a little wistful. "Well, go. I'll take care of this, and you have a good flight and a good holiday."

She took another breath and wiped her eyes again. "Okay. Okay, thank you," she said, and turned to shuffle away, leaving Justin alone with the box.

He rubbed his forehead wearily and set the package down on his desk, pulling out the telephone book and opening it to the yellow pages.

An hour later Justin had learned that every company that advertised 24/7 service really only meant 24/7 if it was within the city limits, and very few of them meant that to include holidays as well. Most of them didn't even answer the telephone, and he hung up with disgust when Zippy OnTime's answering machine came on.

Justin glanced at the clock and again at the package. It was now well after 10:30. He tried JC's cell phone and received a no-signal error message. He took a deep breath and rehearsed a short, polite and to-the-point voice mail message before trying JC's home phone and leaving a message there, as well as on his work phone in case JC called in. He sent two e-mails about the delivery fuck-up -- one had bounced back to him within minutes, and there had been no response to the other. Justin chewed his lip. It was possible that this place in Connecticut was truly remote -- maybe JC wouldn't even get the e-mails. He tried to picture the sleek Chasez family roughing it at some rustic location and failed utterly, and then glanced at the clock again.

Justin swiveled his chair around and stared down at the street, so many floors below. All the surrounding buildings were dark but the street was full of bright headlights, grid-locked with people trying to get out of the city before the long holiday weekend.

Justin turned slowly back to his desk and stared at the package like it was an undetonated bomb. He wracked his brain for another option and came up with nothing -- the package had

to get to JC, and the only one who could take it to him was Justin. And although the tension between Justin and JC had eased a little over the past month, Justin would very much prefer to avoid showing up on JC's doorstep, unannounced and uninvited. He'd rather send anyone else, pay any sum of money to keep from having to do this. But he couldn't come up with another option.

Lance had left for Mississippi the previous weekend and placed his car in Justin's keeping. With a groan of pure misery Justin turned back to his computer and brought up MapQuest.

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Traffic out of the city had still been backed up at midnight when Justin had finally left his office, FedEx box tucked firmly under his arm, and made his way home. MapQuest had given him three pages of amazingly complex instructions and smugly informed him that it would take approximately 3.7 hours to drive from Justin's apartment building to wherever the fuck JC was in Connecticut, if traffic and weather permitted. Justin had prudently checked a weather site and learned that the New York City area could expect sleet possibly turning to snow very early Friday morning. He wasn't all that confident of his bad weather driving skills.

Thus Justin found himself alone in Lance's Camry at 8:00 on Thanksgiving morning, heading across the bridge and out of New York City.

Traffic was still a little heavy but at least it was moving, he thought, carefully passing a minivan full of people. He'd considered going the previous evening, but the back-up had still been so terrible, and he knew that attempting such a long drive at that hour was simply foolhardy. Better to go home and catch some sleep before trying it, and his mouth twisted wryly as he admitted to himself that he'd gotten almost no sleep whatsoever, worrying about this.

But really, there was nothing to worry about, Justin told himself firmly as he turned on the CD player and tried to relax. It was an unavoidable work thing, a fuck-up that he, thankfully, was not responsible for, but that he had the power to fix. He'd be helping out Chris, and JC, and Jennifer the unpaid intern, and the author. And Nick Carter, he guessed, although he wasn't so pleased about that part.

And really, it wasn't like he had pressing plans this morning. He'd called Joey and explained that he had some work to do and would miss football, but he shouldn't have any trouble making it to their house for dinner, which was scheduled for 6:00. Traffic should be light on a holiday like this, he thought hopefully as he unclenched his fingers from the steering wheel and flexed them a little. Even allowing for the unfamiliar roads, he should get there by noon, drop off the package, and be back in the city by 4:00, 5:00 at the very latest. He'd just drive up to wherever this house was, knock on the door, pass the box to JC along with the message to call Chris, and drive away. He wouldn't even have to turn off the ignition, he thought optimistically. It was all going to work out just fine.

And while he'd much rather be sleeping in this morning, taking a long, peaceful and solitary road trip wasn't such a bad thing. He had snacks and something to drink, music he loved, a car that was relatively comfortable to drive, and no stressful deadlines to be anywhere. He'd

never driven through Connecticut, but it was supposed to be very pretty, and Justin hadn't been out of the city in months. He was looking forward to seeing some very fine scenery.

Besides JC, of course. The thought slid slyly through his mind and he rolled his eyes at himself in exasperation. "Stop that," he muttered out loud, and turned the music up.

When the holidays were over, Justin thought determinedly, he was going to go out more. He was getting a handle on his work load, and he was tired of not having any sort of social or sex life. He was young, attractive, and somewhat successful, he reminded himself. He was a good catch, and it was ridiculous to be pining after a man who wasn't interested in him anymore, no matter how insanely hot and fascinating that man may be. JC was out of his league, Justin thought morosely. Way out of his league, and the sooner he dealt with that little fact of life and moved on, the happier he would be.

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He was only a little more than halfway there; how could he be lost already? Justin pulled into a convenience store parking lot and put the car into park. He frowned at his MapQuest directions and smoothed the map he'd found in Lance's glove compartment across the steering wheel. Everything had been fine until he left the main highway, and MapQuest had told him to go north at a junction where the only options had been east or west. His finger traced his route carefully back to what had possibly been the wrong junction, and he scowled again at his instructions and looked up through his windshield to get his bearings. The sign said it was the correct road, but he seemed to be heading east when MapQuest said he should be going north. It was very confusing.

To make matters worse, clouds had been gathering for the last hour. Ominous and dark, they'd scuttled across the hazy sky until they'd filled it up, making it seem much later than it really was. Justin cast a worried eye upwards and heaved himself out of the car with a grunt, map and instructions in hand. Time to ask for directions.

Twenty minutes later he had a full tank of gas, instructions from a sympathetic convenience store clerk, a second, more detailed map, and scattered raindrops hitting his windshield. Justin threw himself back into the car, teeth chattering against the sudden drop in temperature, and got back on the road, turning back the way he'd come.

He passed the junction where he'd made the wrong turn and continued west, trusting the clerk's assurance that the road would eventually turn north and his instructions would make sense again. Traffic had thinned to almost nothing and the road seemed subtly narrower and darker. His windshield wipers were working steadily now, the raindrops getting thicker and slushier, and Justin turned the music down to a low background murmur so he could concentrate. He wasn't nervous, he told himself firmly. A little rain was nothing to get nervous about. The weather forecast had said that the hard stuff wouldn't come until early the next morning; he had plenty of time to do his errand and get back home.

The road did indeed turn gradually north. Houses became bigger and more luxurious and were spaced farther and farther apart. The forest grew thicker and seemed to encroach more closely on the road, and the road itself got narrower. The rain turned to slush and fell harder, and Justin found himself going well below the speed limit. He chewed his lip nervously and

wondered if the tires on Lance's car were all-terrain, or if there were cables in the trunk, and he hoped fervently it wouldn't be necessary to find out.

Justin made another careful turn at another junction and took some deep breaths to calm himself. It wouldn't do to land on JC's doorstep freaked out because of some inclement weather, and he reminded himself that he was there only to drop off a package. His heart sank at little as he saw it was already past noon. He hoped desperately that he wouldn't be interrupting some huge and fancy family holiday dinner. God, if only there had been a way to send someone else.

Without taking his eyes off the slippery road, Justin reached over to the passenger seat and picked up his cell phone. He had to be getting close; perhaps it would be worth trying to call JC's cell phone and alerting him that he was making this delivery. It would certainly be better than just arriving unannounced on his doorstep. But Justin's phone wouldn't even give him a signal strong enough to make the call, and he threw it back on the seat with a growl of irritation.

Time ticked on. The road twisted and turned as the day grew rapidly darker, and Justin was finally forced to admit that what was hitting his windshield was snow, not rain. His preoccupation with the worsening weather made him almost miss the small turnoff that he'd been looking for, marked only with a heavy-duty mailbox bearing the number that matched the address on the box beside him. He hadn't seen another car in almost an hour, so he braked carefully and put the car into reverse, backing up until he could turn on to the narrow lane.

Now *this* was remote, Justin thought as he slowly negotiated the unmarked road. The pavement seemed in good repair but the trees marched right up to the edge, affording very little space to pull over. Justin wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans and tried to slow his racing heart. His original, hazy impression of a family estate in a luxurious and security-gated community must be completely wrong. He had to be almost there; he hadn't seen another house in miles and miles.

It was dark enough to be dusk and the narrow road had a slippery coat of wet snow on it when Justin rounded a corner and saw the road come to a dead end and open into a clearing. The pavement ended and became gravel, and at the far end of the clearing stood a small, neat house.

It looked like a rustic log cabin, Justin thought with interest, but it seemed a little too precise in its lines and angles. There were lights blazing from the row of tall windows looking over a long porch, and smoke rising cheerfully from the stone chimney. There was only one other vehicle in the clearing and it was one of JC's -- a black Mercedes SUV that managed to look vaguely European and luxurious as well as functional. It was definitely the right place.

Justin's heart was pounding, and his palms were sticky as he unclenched them from the steering wheel. From the looks of it, JC was here -- all he had to do was hand over the box and deliver the message and he could be on his way. Any detailed explanations could wait for Monday, and he could use the steadily worsening weather as an excuse not to stay if JC tried to make him come in and talk to him about the box.

As if JC would be glad to see him or anxious for him to stay. Justin sighed in exasperation at himself.

He took a deep, steadying breath, grabbed the FedEx box, and flung himself out of the car. The cold, wet air was a shock that made him gasp and turn back to the car to grab his coat, but he stopped himself. Just deliver the box and run, he reminded himself firmly, and with that he jogged across the wet gravel and climbed the steps to the porch.

Up close the house was even more inviting; the wood of the log walls the warm color of honey, the smell of wood smoke tantalizing. There was music coming faintly from inside, and golden light spilled through the beveled glass inserts on the front door. Justin hesitated, his tension level almost unbearable, and he looked again at the single vehicle parked in front of the house.

It didn't appear to be a big family gathering. JC's SUV wouldn't fit more than four comfortably, and now that Justin was closer he could see that the back seat was down, as if JC had been transporting luggage or something. Oh, it hurt to think about it, but what if JC wasn't here alone? Not with family members, but with -- someone else? It would be too much to be confronted with such a thing; Justin would not be able to bear it. For a wild moment he was tempted to leave the box on the porch, ring the doorbell, and run back to his car like a teenager playing a prank.

Justin squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. That was stupid -- it didn't matter who JC had in there with him, who'd he'd brought to this unbearably romantic place for a long, idyllic weekend. He was just the messenger, he reminded himself sternly, and with that in mind he stepped forward and pressed the doorbell.

The snow was falling more heavily and the cold made him shiver. The sound of the doorbell echoed faintly and Justin tried to school his face into a casual expression, rehearse an easy greeting and explanation of why he was here on JC's doorstep, and to not look too freaked out. Or embarrassed, which he totally was. The music was turned down and a shadow moved beyond the glass inserts, but when the door finally did swing open Justin found himself unable to say anything at all.

Warmth and light framed JC in the open doorway and flowed like a wave to where Justin stood, damp and shivering on the porch. He couldn't see JC's expression because the light was behind him, but the way he stood, lean and motionless in the doorway, made Justin gulp hard.

"Hey," he started, pleased with how steady his voice sounded. "I'm really sorry to bother you on the holiday like this."

JC took a step over the threshold and simply stared at him. "Justin," he said slowly, and his eyebrows went up as he looked blankly at the FedEx box in Justin's arms. "Do you have another job that I don't know about?" he asked mildly, and Justin flushed with embarrassment.

"No, of course not," he said a little tersely. "This is something that the nonfiction and art departments absolutely had to have to you by tomorrow morning, but they missed FedEx," he

said, holding out the box. "So, here. Take it. Oh, and call Chris on his cell."

The box hung suspended between them as JC stared at it, then at Justin, then past him to Lance's car. "You drove all the way out here," he finally asked, "to make a delivery for the art department?"

"Well, there was nobody else to deal with it," Justin said. He jiggled the box impatiently. It was an effort to keep from shivering.

JC made no move to take the box, continuing to stare at Justin with an unreadable expression. Then he blinked. "Jesus," he muttered, "come in. It's freezing out here."

"No, really, I don't want to disturb you, I just wanted to drop this off . . ." but JC was already backing through the doorway, motioning Justin impatiently inside.

Justin took a couple of steps and found himself surrounded with light and warmth and good smells as JC closed the door firmly behind him. He couldn't restrain himself -- his eyes moved rapidly and greedily around the room, gathering a disjointed impression of warm wood tones, comfortable furniture facing a fireplace, a high ceiling and stairs leading up to what seemed to be an open loft. There was a desk under the stairs, but the focus of the room was the large stone fireplace in which a fire was cheerfully crackling. There seemed to be nobody else there, at least that he could see, and Justin felt a surge of relief that made his heart stutter.

JC had closed the door and moved to stand beside him. "Okay, start from the beginning," he said grimly, and Justin turned to face him. JC was angry; Justin recognized all the signs. Tense jaw, mouth pressed into a firm, straight line, eyes shuttered and unreadable. "What exactly is in that box?"

"Hey," Justin protested a little. "Don't get mad at me, I'm just the messenger."

JC pulled in a deep breath that meant he was struggling with patience, and Justin leaned over to set the box on a nearby table. "Okay. All I know," he said mildly, "is that the art department's intern landed in my office last night in hysterics about getting this box to you. Something about a last-minute controversy about cover art, I don't know any of the details. You're supposed to look at it, and call Chris." JC stared silently at him, and Justin shrugged. "Honestly, you now know everything I know."

A muscle jumped in JC's jaw. "Chris sent you out here," he said flatly.

"No," Justin corrected him. "Chris did not send me out here. I have not talked to Chris. The intern said that *you* should call Chris, and Chris will give you the details."

JC stared hard at him for a long, tense moment, and then seemed to relax a little. "I can't believe you brought this all the way out here," he said, lifting the box and examining the address. "That's insane."

Justin thought of his long, harrowing drive and felt a spurt of anger beneath his discomfort. "Hey," he flared. "If there'd been anyone else in the New York metro area I could've foisted

this onto, I would have. Believe me. I didn't drive all the way out here on Thanksgiving Day because I had nothing better to do, you know."

JC looked up from tearing the FedEx box open, his blue eyes wide and sharp, and for the first time Justin really looked at him -- his jeans, soft and faded to a light blue, a long-sleeved black shirt that opened at the neck, his bare feet. He hadn't shaved and his jaw was dark with stubble, but his hair was damp, as if he'd recently showered, and that was a very, very dangerous line of thought. Justin gulped and pulled his eyes away.

"I should be going," he announced, taking a step toward the door. "I need to get back to civilization before the weather gets any worse."

He had his hand on the doorknob when JC's voice stopped him. "Wait a minute, Justin," he said, setting the box down. "Are you sure about that?"

"Of course," Justin said brightly, pulling the door open and glancing swiftly toward JC. "I'm really sorry for disturbing your holiday," he said, his eyes skittering away from JC's frown. "Good luck with whatever's in that box, and I'll see you Monday, okay?"

He took a fast step out the door and on to the porch, his eyes widening a little with alarm at how hard the snow was now falling. It was sticking to his car and to the road, too, he noticed with dismay, and he hesitated at the top of the stairs.

"Are you sure you can drive in this?" JC asked quietly from the doorway behind him. "I don't think your friend's car has snow tires, does it?"

"I . . . I don't know," Justin said slowly, his eyes intent on the safety of Lance's car. "I'm sure it does."

"You're sure," came the skeptical comment. "They don't look like snow tires to me."

Justin stared at Lance's car from the shelter of the porch. They didn't look like snow tires to him, either. God damn Lance.

"There are probably cables in the trunk," Justin said, shifting from foot to foot and stuffing his cold hands into his pockets.

"You're sure about that?" JC's voice was mild, faintly curious. "The way it's coming down, you'll need them to get back out to the main highway."

Justin stared desperately at the car. "Yeah, there has to be."

"Okay," said JC. "Let me get some shoes on, and I'll help you put them on."

"No!" Justin said in alarm, and squeezed his eyes shut. "No, seriously, I'm sure I can get back out to the road, it'll be okay. I don't want to disturb your holiday."

"Don't be stupid," JC said scornfully, and Justin clenched his teeth. "I'll be right there."

Justin nodded stiffly without looking back and stomped across the clearing to where he'd left Lance's car. "Please," he muttered quietly to himself as his shoes crunched through the settling snow. "Please, please, please let there be cables, please."

When JC joined him a minute later Justin had pulled on his coat, popped the trunk, and was sorting through the clutter with grim determination. JC leaned in beside him, shoving aside a container of antifreeze, two spare cans of oil, a pile of rags, the spare tire jack and a small toolkit in a bright blue box. Justin searched furiously, refusing to give up even when he'd examined and discarded every item in the trunk twice. JC stood silently beside him and watched.

"I guess your friend doesn't carry cables," he observed quietly, and Justin closed his eyes in silent misery.

"I guess not," he said. "But you know, I think I can still make it back to the road, if I leave right now . . ."

"You won't make it fifty yards before you slide into a tree," JC said flatly. "You're going to have to stay here."

"No, that's out of the question," Justin said as panic started to rise. "I don't want to disturb . . ."

"You don't want to disturb me, you don't want to intrude on my holiday, you don't want to be here. Yes, I got that the first three times you said it," JC interrupted impatiently. "Honestly, Justin, I don't see that you have much of a choice. You can't drive in this."

Justin straightened up and stared at the car, already dusted with snow. His hands and feet were freezing; he could feel snow settling in his hair, and the temperature was still dropping. JC waited silently beside him while he struggled.

"I'm so sorry about this, JC," he finally said.

"Well, these things happen," JC said, turning back to the house. "Let's get inside before we both catch pneumonia." He trudged back up the walkway, and with a glance of ferocious betrayal at Lance's car, Justin followed.

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The snow had stopped sometime after dark and the clouds had lifted, allowing the moon to bathe Justin's room in faint, silvery illumination. It had been a very, very long and stressful day but Justin was wide awake in the comfortable full-sized bed in JC's guest room. He'd tried counting sheep, and counting wood slats in the ceiling. He'd closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep and it shouldn't have been this hard. He'd been up late the previous night, he'd gotten very little sleep and then had been up early this morning. He'd had a long, difficult drive, and a day and evening spent in JC's company, which had been remarkably painful. He should be exhausted. He should've been asleep hours ago.

But his body thrummed with tension, and all his senses seemed hyper-aware. The fire was still burning in the living room, banked down but throwing a soft glow through his half-open bedroom door. JC was upstairs, and an hour ago Justin had heard his footsteps quietly crossing the open loft to what was presumably the master bathroom. He'd held his breath and strained to hear, hoping against hope that he would hear footsteps padding down the stairs, across the wide living room and to his open doorway. Justin's breath had grown short just thinking about it -- JC appearing in his doorway with the glow of the living room's fireplace behind him, pushing his door all the way open, eyes searching for Justin in the bed.

What would he do? Justin asked himself shakily. If JC came down the stairs and to his doorway, what would he do? Pretend to be asleep? Sit up and ask him if something was wrong? Or hold out his hand and whisper JC's name, draw him out of the cool room and under the warm covers and into his arms?

Justin almost groaned out loud at the thought, covering his face with his hands and rubbing fiercely at his forehead. This had to stop, he reminded himself shakily. This absolutely had to stop. He'd had his chance with JC. He'd had his chance and he'd blown it. JC didn't hate him anymore, and he might even trust Justin on a professional level again someday soon, but he was not the kind of man who forgot the sort of personal deception Justin had delivered. He was not the sort of person who forgave.

When they'd returned to the house after abandoning the search for snow cables, Justin had been nervy and tongue-tied. Part of him hadn't been able to believe that JC was here in this house alone for the long holiday weekend. He'd sat by the fire and gazed numbly around him, taking in the simple but clean lines of the main room, the comfortable furnishings, the warm light. There was music coming from cleverly hidden speakers, and a criminally expensive collection of electronics hidden in a rustic entertainment center. A hardbound book lay on the table beside the couch, marked with a tasseled bookmark and resting beside a glass of white wine. JC had just been relaxing in front of the fire, Justin had realized slowly. Alone on Thanksgiving. No family, no friends, no lover.

He'd let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, just as JC swore quietly from the desk, where he'd finally ripped open the Fed Ex box and was examining its contents. Justin had watched silently as JC sorted through several cover comps, scowled, and then muttered another vicious curse. He'd looked up to find Justin watching him, and raised his eyebrows.

"Looks like I have to make a phone call," he'd said, straightening up and throwing the cover comps to the desk. "Do you feel like taking a walk?"

Justin had been puzzled until he remembered his own difficulties in calling JC's cell phone. "Sure," he'd said, looking down at his wet sneakers resignedly. "I need to make a couple of calls too."

JC had disappeared into a closet by the front door and emerged with a pair of snow boots, gloves, and a knit hat. "These should fit you," he'd said shortly, setting them down by the sofa.

Justin had stared at them. "Are they yours?" he'd asked cautiously, and JC shook his head.

"No, my dad left them here last time he visited." His mouth had lifted in a small smile. "They'll probably be too big for you."

They were a little big, but they were better than Justin's wet sneakers. He'd followed JC out into the snow storm, around the back of the house to the edge of the clearing. JC headed for a trail that inclined through the trees and up a gentle hill, and Justin's tension had eased as he found himself unexpectedly captivated by the atmosphere. There had been no wind and the falling snow created a silence that made Justin want to step quietly and hold his breath so as to not disturb the still air. He'd thought this might be one of the most peaceful places he'd ever been.

The silence had been broken when they were almost to the top of the hill. Justin had been watching JC's lean form climbing ahead of him and not where his own feet were stepping when he'd slipped on a wet, hidden branch and found himself suddenly sitting in the slushy, muddy snow. He'd closed his eyes for a moment, mortified, and wondered if this day could get any worse.

JC had turned quickly and blinked in surprise to find Justin on his ass in the snow behind him. His mouth had twitched but his response had been perfectly polite.

"Are you all right?" he'd asked, and Justin had glowered up at him, his face turning red.

"Yeah," he'd said, and then sighed. "Just, please don't ask me if I had a good trip," he'd muttered, and then JC had stifled a snicker as he'd stepped forward and reached out a gloved hand to help Justin to his feet.

"Okay, I won't," he'd said, smiling a little as he reached down. "But I can't tell you I didn't think it."

Justin had taken his hand slowly, almost reluctant. Even the most casual touches messed with his mind these days, and when their gloved hands clasped and JC pulled him to his feet Justin had been reminded of just how painful it was to be this physically close to JC. They'd both frozen for a moment, standing near enough that their puffs of breath mingled in the cold air. Then JC had stepped slowly away and they'd climbed the rest of the hill in silence.

Cell phone reception achieved, Justin had called Joey and apologized for not being able to make it to dinner. He'd given a very abbreviated version of his morning and closed his eyes in silent misery as Joey had laughed and said "Well, we'll miss you today, Justin, but I'm sure you'll have a much more, uh, enjoyable time where you're at."

"Thanks so much for your compassion and understanding, Joe," Justin had said sourly, and hung up on Joey's cheerful "go get him!!" JC was on his own phone across the clearing, and Justin had heard him saying "Of course we have to take the author's opinion into consideration, Chris, but if he has bad taste he has bad taste. We're the ones who have to sell the book, ultimately the choice is up to us . . ." as he dialed his grandmother's number and waited for it to connect.

His grandmother's kitchen was utter chaos, and Justin felt his heart squeeze with the pain of missing his family as he spoke with his grandparents, his mother, and assorted cousins. It

sounded loud and cheerful and over-crowded, and when Justin closed his eyes he could easily picture the scene he'd been part of so many times -- lifting tinfoil covers and sneaking bites of various side dishes until his grandmother chased him out of her kitchen with a rolled up dish towel, playing touch football with his cousins on his grandparents' lawn during halftime of the bowl games, getting mildly tipsy on beer. It was light years away from this quiet clearing on a hill in Connecticut.

As he'd said his goodbyes he'd become aware of JC's voice, lower and more intimate than when he'd talked to Chris. Justin had turned his back politely but had been unable to keep himself from straining to listen as JC had laughed, a happy sound that made Justin smile a little even as his heart thumped.

"I miss you too," JC had said, and "yeah, it's snowing here, can you believe it? This early?" and another laugh before saying, "tell her to use sun screen this time." And then, more quietly, "I love you too, Mom. I miss you too."

Justin had moved away so he couldn't hear the rest of JC's conversation, feeling like he was intruding. JC had been quiet on their way back to the cabin, and Justin had cleared his throat and asked him about Chris and the cover art. They'd talked quietly about art issues and pain-in-the- ass authors as they negotiated their way carefully down the slippery trail.

"So, why didn't you go to Memphis for the holiday?" JC had asked, and Justin had sighed.

"I couldn't get a flight that had any sort of decent airfare," he said, and smiled a little at JC's frown. "I don't expect you to understand that. But I had a lot of work to do, and thought it would be a good time to catch up. And I'll be going home for Christmas; that's only a month away." He'd glanced over at JC's serious face as they walked down the narrow path. "What about you?"

"I don't really know anyone in Memphis," JC said casually, surprising Justin into a short laugh. He'd explained that his family usually traveled over the Thanksgiving holiday, but they'd decided to go to Madrid this year, and he hadn't felt the trip was worth it when he'd have so little time there. His family, JC had said with a smile, would be there for two weeks, but he didn't feel like he could leave the press again when he'd just returned from Europe himself.

They were within sight of the house again and Justin had decided to satisfy his curiosity. "So, this place, does this belong to your family?"

"No, it's mine," JC had answered, his eyes on the house in the clearing. "I had the house built a few years ago, and the land was part of my inheritance from my grandmother."

"The one who ran the press?" Justin had guessed, and JC had nodded as they left the shelter of the trees and headed across the clearing.

"That's right. She told me once that I needed a place to relax." His mouth had lifted in a brief smile as he'd motioned Justin to precede him up the stairs to the house. "She thought I was too tightly wound."

"Well, it's a beautiful place," Justin had said honestly. A part of him had wondered why JC had never mentioned the cabin to him during the previous summer and fall when they'd been spending so much time together, but he'd pushed the thought sternly aside. It was none of his business, not anymore. "I don't see how you can avoid relaxing here."

"It's pretty remote," JC had agreed. "Most of the time you can't even get a cell phone signal without climbing that hill, and I had to put in a satellite dish to get television access and internet. And even that doesn't work much in the winter. But I like it here."

"I can see why," Justin had said, and JC had given him a pleased smile as they climbed the back steps and paused to shed their wet jackets and boots before entering the back door.

It was the memory of that smile that made Justin toss restlessly now. It had been wide and unguarded, the sort of smile Justin had once been used to getting from JC, the sort of smile he hadn't seen from him since Joey had been fired in September. And he missed it, he acknowledged sadly. He missed all of it.

This bed was incredibly comfortable -- almost too comfortable. It was perfectly firm, like it didn't get much use. It didn't sag in the middle like Justin's bed at home, and it was too easy to remember the nights JC had stayed with him at his apartment last summer, the way they'd always ended up tangled together in the middle of Justin's taco shell-like mattress. How luxurious and arousing it had been to wake slowly in the morning with JC stretched warm and naked against him, his soft, smooth skin, his hands sliding slowly and appreciatively over Justin's body. JC had never complained about his mattress, Justin thought, shifting restlessly. Quite the opposite.

But that was yet another dangerous line of thought, and Justin rolled over to thump his perfectly plump pillow with his fist and stuff it back under his head. He closed his eyes and tried again to settle into sleep, but it was impossible. After a few minutes he sat up, pausing to listen to the absolute silence in the little house before rising from the bed and padding out to the living room.

It was dark except for the warm glow from the banked fireplace and the faint illumination in the windows. Justin walked quietly across the living room to look out at the clearing, where Lance's car sat next to JC's Mercedes, both covered with an icy-looking covering of slush. He moved silently to the kitchen and got a glass of water, setting it down by the couch before gently opening the glass doors on the fireplace and placing a fresh log on the fire. Careful not to make any noise, he wrapped himself in the afghan draped over the back of the couch and sat down to watch the fire.

The rest of the day had passed uneventfully, with JC being the perfect, polite host and Justin being the perfect, polite guest. They'd prepared a makeshift meal in the afternoon and topped it off with a frozen cherry pie and a bottle of painfully good wine. They'd talked about the press, about books on the current best seller list, about the weather. JC had apologized for the lack of television reception and offered Justin his choice of movies; Justin had instead chosen a book from the overflowing bookshelf and they'd settled down in chairs opposite the fire and each other. Justin had tried to relax and let the book absorb him, but his attention kept straying to the sharp curve of JC's cheekbone, the way the fire illuminated his skin as he bent

attentively to his own book, sipped from his wineglass, turned the pages. It had been painfully distracting.

What made it all so much worse, Justin thought morosely, was that on the surface this was exactly the way he'd loved to spend days off with JC last summer. His distracting good looks aside, JC was quite simply someone Justin enjoyed passing a quiet, uneventful day with. Just a few short months ago, a day spent with him like this would've filled Justin with a rich happiness and contentment.

Everything about this afternoon had been lovely, except that when they'd moved around each other in the kitchen there had been no touching, and when they'd sat across from each other at the table there had been no laughter, no teasing, no smiles, no significant eye contact. It had been a nice, peaceful evening, except for the part where JC had stood, given Justin a tense and tight sort of smile as he'd said goodnight, and walked up the stairs to his bedroom alone while Justin had turned to the dark and lonely guest room.

Justin sighed, overwhelmed for a moment with misery. Maybe it was just because it was a holiday, and he was feeling sad and homesick, he told himself tiredly. But the longing he felt for JC seemed to be just as fierce now as it had been the first time he laid eyes on him, and if Justin was truthful with himself he knew that if anything it had grown stronger. An uncomplicated physical attraction would've faded by now, Justin thought as he stared into the fire and felt its warmth soak into his skin. What he felt for JC went far deeper and was much more intense. Even his fury over Joey's firing hadn't really dampened his feelings for any significant amount of time. He was in love with JC, Justin thought dismally, and closed his eyes.

"Justin?"

JC was capable of moving very silently, and Justin had not even heard him come out of his bedroom in the loft. The floorboard creaked as JC stepped down the final stair and padded into the living room. He walked slowly over to the fire and Justin watched him hungrily even as he admonished himself not to stare. JC's hair was messed up and wild, and his black sleep pants and tank top made his skin look creamy and sleep-warmed. Justin blinked hard and schooled his expression into neutrality as JC turned to face him.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, and Justin tried a small, non-committal smile.

"Yeah," he said, winding the afghan more securely around his body. "I'm fine. God, I hope I didn't wake you up."

JC held his hands out to the fire and glanced sideways at him. "No, no I wouldn't have heard you at all if I hadn't been awake too." His voice was low and rough and Justin suppressed a shiver. "I hope -- is the bed uncomfortable?"

"No, not at all. The bed's very comfortable, and I'm tired, and it's so peaceful here." Justin tucked his bare feet under him and sighed. "Honestly, I don't know why I can't sleep."

JC watched him closely and Justin struggled to keep his features relaxed. "Sometimes it's hard to sleep out here," JC suggested softly, "because it's so quiet." He smiled a little. "You

get used to the noise of the city after a while."

"Yeah, that's probably it," Justin said. Under the afghan his fingers tangled tightly together -- he wanted to go back to the safety of the guest room, or for JC to go back upstairs, but at the same time he felt an almost desperate need to make JC stay here and talk to him. Justin took a deep breath and gave him what he hoped was a calm, tired smile, and when he did JC hesitated a moment before sinking into the chair across from him, beside the fire.

"I realized that I never thanked you for bringing Chris's package out here today," he said quietly. "I hope you don't think I wasn't grateful -- it really was an emergency situation, and I feel bad that I took off early on Wednesday before the whole thing blew up. I'm very sorry that you got stuck dealing with the fallout."

"Hey, it wasn't your fault," Justin protested. "I mean, how were you supposed to know that the author would come in and pitch a fit that close to the deadline?"

"Still, I should've been there to handle it," JC said, formal and polite. "It's not right that you got roped into that errand, and I appreciate the trouble you went through to get those cover comps to me."

Justin untangled a hand and waved it dismissively. "It wasn't a big deal, really," he said. "I didn't have big plans this morning, and if the weather hadn't turned I would've been out of your hair right away. I'm the one who's sorry," he continued with a wry smile. "I mean, I know that you hardly ever get the chance to take a little time off, and I'm sure that company is the last thing you wanted this weekend."

"No, I don't mind," JC said politely, remotely. "And I would have had trouble forgiving myself if you'd tried to make the drive back to the city and gotten into an accident."

Justin felt warmth bloom in his belly and searched desperately for a change in topic. "Well, the weather seems to have cleared. Do you want me to take that stuff back with me? Will Chris need it before Monday morning?"

"I think we sorted out the problem on the phone today," JC said, rubbing his palms on the legs of his pants. He kept his eyes on the fire and Justin allowed himself to just stare at his profile, the curve of his shoulders, the subtle flex of muscles in his upper arms. It was excruciating. "I'll call the author tomorrow and sort him out," JC said lazily. "There won't be any problem, I'll make sure of that."

"That's good," Justin said. "I have two books scheduled in early January; I don't want the printers to be pissed off at us."

"That's right," JC said, his eyes bright and far too alert on Justin's face. "I know you worked really hard to get them transmitted in time. They're going to be good books for us."

"I think so too," Justin said with some satisfaction. "It'll make all the stress worth it if they are."

JC shifted a little in his chair. "I know you've been really overloaded lately," he said quietly. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, actually."

Justin blinked and tried to shift gears. It was the middle of the night, and he was alone in a textbook romantic setting with the man he'd just admitted to himself that he was in love with. It seemed so incredibly wrong that he couldn't take a stab at seducing JC, so exasperating that JC actually seemed to want to discuss business.

Justin sternly reminded himself that after the debacle of the five year plan, he was fortunate to even be on speaking terms with JC. He was, in fact, lucky to be employed at all, and with that in mind he took a deep breath and tried to formulate some sort of intelligent response.

"Actually, I think I'm starting to get a handle on the workload," he said, and tried not to let his tension show in his voice. "I won't lie to you and say that the last couple of months haven't been, um, difficult," he added, "but I think things are starting to get better."

JC regarded him closely, and Justin squirmed. "If you can call a steady 75 to 80 hour work week better," he said wryly, "I'd agree with you."

"Hey, you work at least that much," Justin said defensively.

"That's different. That's a byproduct of the job I came from," JC answered flatly. "I'm used to it. It's not something that you should have to be doing, not in this business."

Tension curled in his stomach and Justin grit his teeth. "So, are you saying that I'm not being efficient enough?" he asked slowly, and JC sighed.

"No, I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying that you've been doing the job of two acquiring editors as well as managing the department, and that can't go on indefinitely or you'll burn out. I put off getting a replacement because I wanted to see if the music department was worth saving or not."

Justin felt a surge of alarm and anger. "I don't . . . JC, I don't know how you can even question that," he burst out, struggling to keep his voice calm. "I mean, the books on the fall list -- I just, they're doing so well, and I can't wait to show you what's shaping up for the spring list, really, there are some wonderful manuscripts . . ."

"Justin, stop," JC said quietly, and Justin's mouth closed with an audible snap. "You had to know that I'd question that, in light of the failure of last year's books and the way Fatone ran the . . ."

"But everything's changed since then," Justin interrupted desperately. "I mean, I think we've gotten totally on track and . . ."

"Justin," JC said more forcefully this time, and Justin subsided with an effort. "I'm not trying to get into an argument with you. I don't have any idea where this is coming from. Do you really think I'd axe the music department now? After the way you've pulled things together?"

Justin stared at him, still breathing quickly. He didn’t want to get into an argument either; the memory of the last time they’d fought, in the press’s conference room, was still too vivid and painful. He made an effort to calm himself, to make himself speak quietly.

"Honestly, I really don’t know what you might do," he said slowly. "You’re so hard, JC, you’re so hard on everyone. I just never know what you might do."

There was a long, painful silence and beneath the afghan Justin twisted his hands together. "You’re talking about Joey Fatone’s firing," JC finally said flatly, and Justin nodded.

"Sure I am," Justin replied quietly. "You can’t say that you weren’t hard on him, that you didn’t make his life miserable for months and months before you fired him."

JC slowly turned his head and looked at him, his mouth tight. "I’m not going to argue with you about this," he said in a quiet, deadly tone. "I know he’s your friend, Justin, but he dug his own grave with me and it started immediately, in January."

"I know that," Justin said levelly. "I know he wasn’t doing his job, JC, and that he either had to step up or get out. But I also know how hard you pushed him, how hard you push everybody." Justin took a deep breath, his heart galloping. "That thing about the five year plan, that wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t driven him to the breaking point." He waited a beat, his eyes holding JC’s as they narrowed dangerously at him. "And if I hadn’t felt so bad for him, because of the way you were beating him down," he continued carefully, "I probably wouldn’t have helped him with that plan."

JC lifted a single, elegant eyebrow, his blue eyes sharp. "Except for the part where you had ideas that you were interested in seeing implemented for the music department, am I right?" he asked with a deadly, deceptive mildness, and Justin felt himself flush.

"I never said that I wasn’t interested in the long-term goals of the department," Justin said with as much dignity as he could muster. "You knew that. We’d talked about it. You knew I was in publishing for the long haul, that I wanted to make it my career. You can’t blame me for that." He held JC’s eyes for a long moment, until JC nodded slightly and relaxed a little in his chair. "And JC," he continued, leaning forward a little. "I was friends with Joey, good friends. When I first got here and didn't know what the hell I was doing, he helped me -- he really helped me a lot. And so when I saw that he needed help later on, well, I wanted to give the favor back."

"You’re right, I did know those things," JC said quietly. "And I might have been stern with Joey Fatone, and with quite a few other people as well, but I wanted to save the press and I think that justifies everything."

Justin regarded him steadily. "Everything?" he asked softly. "Making people miserable, driving them out of their senses with demands and pressure?"

JC stared back, the flickering light from the fire lighting up the right side of his face. "Oh, I really don’t think I deserve that," he said stiffly, and Justin blinked at him in shock.

"You don’t? Really?" he asked incredulously and JC sat up in his chair, obviously agitated.

"I think I've made a huge effort to be fair," he said, a muscle clenching on the side of his jaw. "I think I've done what had to be done to put the press back on track so the parent company wouldn't cut its losses and sell it off."

Justin watched him, fascinated. "I never said you weren't fair," he said carefully. "I just said that you're really, really hard on people. That you demand too much of them. Too much, too fast."

"I don't require anything from anybody that I don't require of myself," JC said tersely, and Justin tilted his head a little, wondering.

"But you just said that people in the publishing business shouldn't have to kill themselves with the sort of hours you're accustomed to working," he reminded JC quietly. This wasn't exactly true, Justin realized with a cautious little thrill. What JC had said was that *Justin* should not have to be working such hours. He tried to calm his racing heart and waited to see what JC would say.

JC was quiet for a long time, his profile tense as he stared into the fire. "Well, the fact of the matter is that the publishing business is a very different animal from Antaeus," he said finally. "Maybe the things I had to do to put the press back on track seemed harsh to the people working there, but they had to be done." He shrugged, his face impassive and his mouth tight. "I'm sure people think I'm a heartless bastard, but that's the way it goes."

Justin watched him, his heart squeezing painfully. *I know what you did for Joey,* he wanted to say. *I know you got him the job at NYU. I know exactly what kind of a man you are.* The words tangled painfully in his throat. The longing to touch JC, to get up and walk over to him, kneel in front of him and put his hands on those smooth shoulders, to lean forward and kiss those soft lips was almost overwhelming. Justin trembled at the effort it took to remain seated.

"For what it's worth," Justin said quietly, "and I know it's not worth much, but for what it's worth I'm really, really sorry about the whole five-year-plan thing." He lifted a shoulder helplessly and kept his eyes on the warm fire. "If I'd known, if I'd really thought it through . . ." he paused, the words choking him.

If I'd known what it would cost me, he thought with a surge of bitterness and despair. *If I'd known that it would cost me you . . .*

"Well, I wouldn't have done it. Not in a million years would I have done it," he finished softly.

JC was silent for a long time and Justin couldn't look at him, couldn't stand to meet his eyes as he felt his face slowly flush with humiliation. He'd said too much, revealed far, far too much to someone who could already read him like a book.

"Justin. I'm sorry too," JC said quietly and Justin's eyes flew to his, startled. "I am. In retrospect it seems to me that the situation that existed between us at the time . . . Well. It seems obvious that I had lost some perspective in my dealings with you," JC said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "I was, perhaps, much harder on you about that whole thing than I

should've been." His eyes met Justin's directly and Justin's throat went dry. "I understand now the position you were in," JC said gently, "and I am sorry for making you think that I questioned your . . . Your integrity."

Justin hardly dared to breathe, his whole body quivering with tension and a small, tentative hope. He opened his mouth but no sound came out and he swallowed hard and tried again. "I just . . . Um. Thank you," he finally managed, and felt a staggering disappointment when JC averted his eyes and nodded.

"Anyway," JC continued more briskly. "I didn't mean to get off track there, and what I wanted to say to you was that I think it's time for you to hire some help. Get another person to help with the acquiring in your department."

Justin hesitated, again trying to keep up with the shift in the conversation. How on earth did JC just switch channels like that? "Not a manager?" he asked cautiously.

"No," JC said, smiling a little. "It hasn't been ninety days yet, of course, but I think you've earned the title. Get someone to take some of the acquiring load off you." He watched Justin carefully as he digested that.

Justin let himself think about having another person to read manuscripts, meet with authors and editors and designers and marketers. Someone to take some of the work off his desk, and he felt a relief so immense it almost made him dizzy. "I . . oh god, that is so great, JC. Um, thank you," he said formally. "Thank you so much. How soon should I start looking?"

JC shrugged. "Depends on how soon you want your life back," he said with a little smile, and Justin bit his lip. He wanted his life back, of course he did. Extra time would be a wondrous thing. And he wanted to spend that time with JC, he thought wistfully. But despite their conversation, the apologies and Justin's own tentative hopes, he couldn't be sure that JC wanted anything to do with him in that way, not anymore.

"Start the search immediately, if you want," JC said, and now he was standing up, preparing to go back upstairs. "I think I can leave the search to your discretion. I -- or the person who replaces me -- will want to see whoever your final candidates are, of course."

Justin stared up at him. "Okay," he said simply, and felt his heart sink as JC gave him a stiff and polite little smile before turning to go back up the stairs.

"Sleep well," he said over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Justin said quietly. "You too." He stared unblinkingly at JC's lean form until it disappeared into the darkness of his second-floor bedroom.

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JC scowled and hit the brakes. The person in front of him was crawling along at a truly ridiculous pace, and passing was out of the question since the road was winding and narrow. It was going to take hours just to get to the expressway, JC thought, tightening his fingers in

frustration on the steering wheel. He should have waited until tomorrow to come back, shouldn't have tried to brave traffic on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

But it had been impossible to stay any longer in the cabin, impossible to be alone with traitorous thoughts in such a quiet place. JC relied on the cabin for calm and tranquility, and when he found that he could not attain that state after Justin had left him, he was more than a little unsettled.

After he'd bid Justin goodbye on Friday, JC had intended to spend the rest of the day doing some hiking, then to come in, exhausted, and maybe work a bit before reading until he drifted off to sleep. It should have worked, especially given the fact that the night before he'd gotten so little rest.

JC frowned. There were good reasons to have had a bad night's sleep and there were bad reasons, and the night he and Justin had spent together -- well, apart, actually -- in the cabin had been just about as far from satisfactory as it was possible to get. The moment JC had realized he was going to have to ask Justin to stay, he had resolved not to do anything other than interact with him in a calm, friendly fashion, but Justin had been just so gorgeous and compelling, so funny on his ass in the snow with his face all red, so still and calm when they'd read together, and so careful, earnest and proper during their dinner. He had been trying so very hard to make things work smoothly, and JC had found it nearly impossible not to be charmed by him, which, of course, had led straight to more painful thoughts and feelings.

He'd wanted to get through their time together with as little difficulty as possible, but when he'd gone upstairs to sleep on Thursday evening, JC had gazed in frustration first at his huge, inviting bed covered with its thick duvet, and then over at the comfortable dark green leather chair he loved to read in and realized all in a rush that he was going to be unable to find peace. The most familiar objects in the world would not bring him solace tonight, not with Justin Timberlake just a floor below. It was impossible either to relax or get into bed, impossible to do anything other than stand very still and hold his breath as he tried to see if he could hear Justin moving around below. JC had silently paced the floor for a while, sinking his toes into the thick carpet, biting his lower lip and trying to talk himself out of a scenario that had grown more and more attractive with each passing second: he could go downstairs, slide into bed with Justin, and make love to him, could beg, cajole, coax, or do whatever he needed to in order get Justin to agree. JC had been longing to touch him again ever since their hurried encounter in the conference room -- to touch him properly this time. What had happened in the conference room had gone by too quickly, had been too angry, too desperate, too furtive. But now that they were alone in his cabin in the woods, miles and miles away from civilization, JC knew he could take his time -- he could undress and touch Justin with all the deliberation in the world, could rediscover every last thing he'd missed about him at his own pace. It would take hours, and it would be infinitely pleasurable, and then he would let Justin do the same for him. After thinking about it for a while, JC had been close to quivering in anticipation.

It had been ridiculously, insanely difficult to resist the urge to act, and as always, JC had quickly gotten frustrated with himself for being so weak. He and Justin were now clearly able to spend time with each other in civil fashion -- if nothing else, the events of today had

revealed that without question -- but it had been difficult and painful to get there, much moreso than JC would have thought possible. Justin had bewildered him, hurt him beyond belief, and betrayed him. Only a fool would willingly walk into such a situation again.

But what else had Justin made JC other than a fool, and so when JC had heard Justin get out of bed and head into the living room, his dilemma had become excruciating. Justin could very well be down there because he wanted JC to join him, could be actively waiting for him to appear. The thought was terrifying and energizing, and by the time JC had finally worked up the courage to walk down the stairs, his heart had been pounding double time.

However, when he'd gotten to the living room and seen Justin curled up in the afghan, his face strange, beautiful, and sad as he gazed into the firelight, JC had quickly disabused himself of any notion he'd had about sexual intimacy. Justin had looked a million miles away, melancholy, distant, and remote, and JC had been reminded all over again of what the two of them had lost, and how painful it had been to lose it. No -- he was definitely not going to sign up for that kind of hurt again.

The driver in front of JC put on his right-hand turn signal a good five hundred yards before the next turn-off, and JC bit his lower lip in anticipation. The very second this asshole got off the road, he was going to increase his speed drastically, see if he could get back to the city before midnight. Once his obstacle had been removed, JC did accelerate, but it was hard to concentrate the way he knew he needed to, because again, thoughts of Justin filled his mind -- again, he was thrown back into the cabin.

When Justin had driven off in his friend's ridiculously poorly equipped car on Friday afternoon, JC found himself heading straight for the room where Justin had slept to strip the bed, gathering the sheets together in a huge pile and then moving quickly up the stairs to the hamper. He'd leave it to the cleaning person who came in after he left to launder them, but JC could at least change the sheets, could at least get rid of this small, torturous reminder that Justin had slept somewhere in this house that was not JC's own bed. When he'd returned to the spare bedroom, a stack of neatly folded flannel sheets in his arms, JC had stared in annoyance at the bed as he realized he'd forgotten to take care of the pillow cases as well. Dropping the sheets onto the mattress pad, he'd moved to the head of the bed, picked up a pillow that still bore a faint indentation from where Justin had rested his head, and then, to his infinite shock and embarrassment, had closed his eyes and quickly breathed in, close to trembling as he'd caught Justin's scent. JC had quickly come to his senses and gotten back to work after that, but for the rest of his time at the cabin, he'd been haunted by visions of Justin and by memories of their fireside talk.

It was starting to look as if certain things were repaired, but there had been some troubling revelations during the conversation, particularly when Justin had accused JC of being too hard on him and Joey. The thought that he'd lost it so entirely, that he'd acted so fiercely without even realizing it was yet another reason, JC realized, not to try to get together with Justin again. He simply couldn't trust himself when he was with him, couldn't, apparently, be rational about anything having to do with him. Maybe it really was best, JC reminded himself again now as he slowed down a little, but not nearly enough, to drive through one of the many small towns the highway bisected, to keep his distance now, to shield both himself and Justin from such insanity.

The thing was, resolving not to think about Justin felt suspiciously like thinking about him anyway, JC realized with some unhappiness. He was still in JC's mind, still the primary force in many of his dreams, both waking and not, and still the one thing JC devoted most of his emotional energy to.

Not even the familiar sign letting him know that the freeway was a mere 21 miles away could lift JC's spirits very much. Whether he moved toward Justin or away from him, the fact remained that everything was still all about him -- and JC had absolutely no idea what he was going to do about that.

December

December

"Joshua!"

JC looked up from the editorial report he'd been reading and smiled at his grandfather, trying to hide the fact that he'd been completely taken by surprise. Apparently the comings and goings of manuscripts between the acquiring, manuscript editorial, and production departments at Phoenix Press were more fascinating than JC had accounted for.

His grandfather was eminently old fashioned, so JC rose to his feet in respect, then grinned happily and stepped forward for a hug when the old man opened his arms. Difficult and irascible as he was, JC's grandfather was a good man.

"So good to see you again!" he was rumbling, one hand pounding JC solidly on the back.

JC smiled, then waited for his grandfather to take a seat before sinking into his chair again, too. The instant they were settled, a waiter appeared; polite and deferent, he took orders for a scotch for JC's grandfather and a martini for JC and then smoothly moved off. JC sat back in his chair for a moment and grinned as his grandfather studied him, really looked him over. It was far from his favorite thing to be scrutinized, but JC knew that he looked good today, knew that he was healthy, confident, and clear-eyed. He'd been this way all week, actually -- optimistic, forward-thinking, full of anticipation. That was how JC was when things were going well, and he wasn't ashamed to let his grandfather see it.

"You're happy!" his grandfather slowly said, nodding in approval. "Good."

JC inclined his head, waiting politely for his grandfather's next gambit.

"I'm happy too, my boy. Know why?"

"I could probably guess --" JC began, thinking back to his trip to Europe and the acquisitions he'd gained for Antaeus, and then blinked in surprise and let his face spread slowly into a pleased grin as his grandfather pulled out the report about the financial and organizational changes he'd implemented in his tenure at Phoenix Press, as well as the packet of recent reviews and publicity materials JC had given him.

"All signs indicate recovery," the old man was saying, quickly thumbing through the report, and JC couldn't help but smile again as he caught a glance of his grandfather's messy scrawl in the margins. He'd really read it.

"You went in there and cleaned up from top to bottom, got rid of all the dead wood, revamped the publishing program, and set them up leaner and stronger than before. I couldn't be happier with you, Joshua, couldn't be more pleased."

And there it was, the wash of triumph and almost childlike pride JC always felt when he got sincere, honest praise from his grandfather. No matter how old he got, he'd never tire of it.

"Thank you," he said simply. "Really, thank you."

"You deserve it." His grandfather's voice was grave and sincere, full of approval, and again, JC felt a wave of elation. He was about to speak when the waiter returned, confirmed that they were going to have what they always had, steak and salmon, and then scuttled off.

"So can I assume now that you're not going to sell the place?" JC asked.

"Not right now I won't, though I'll have to keep an eye on things," his grandfather answered, and JC narrowed his eyes at the cageyness.

"I don't want you to sell it, Grandpa. Not after I just invested a year of my life in it, not when I'm still in the middle of making several adjustments --"

"Now that's something we really do need to talk about." His grandfather gave JC a long, unwavering look. "Vacation's over, Joshua. I need you back at the parent company."

"I understand that, of course," JC said, his smile fading a bit. "And I'm taking steps to prepare for that -- I'm already reviewing resumes for the directorship. But just a year more, or even six months --"

"After all the money you just made me in Italy there's no way in hell I'd let that happen." His grandfather looked and sounded pleasant enough, but the expression in his eyes was steely and absolute, and JC frowned a little as he realized it.

"But I'm going to have to ease out gradually, all right? I want to check in, see the effects of the changes I've made. Publishing moves so slowly -- it takes half a year before you know if you succeeded at something."

"Do what you need to, Joshua, but starting in the new year, the bulk of your time will be devoted to Antaeus." His grandfather took a fairly large gulp of scotch, put an elbow on the table, and grimaced in satisfaction.

"I have no problem with that," JC said, and it was largely true. Part of him would miss Phoenix a lot, but truly, he was good at what he did for the parent corporation, and in a way, he had missed the cutthroat competition, the bloodthirsty atmosphere. He'd had to be so gentle at the press -- and the funniest thing about that was that even though JC had thought he'd been coddling his employees in almost ridiculous fashion, he'd still heard stories about his legendary coldness, his icy comebacks, his deadly set-downs. If anyone at Phoenix had wandered into an Antaeus board room and seen JC at work there, he doubted they'd even know him.

And yet he really was going to miss the place. The people there might not have been as calculating or precise as JC might have liked, but they were conscientious and hard-working, dedicated to their jobs and to a higher mission of sorts. To them, that would always be a lot more satisfying than corporate raiding.

"But at the same time, Grandpa, I want --" JC leaned forward to make the point, because this was important, something that had been nagging at the back of his mind for days now. "I want to be based in New York again so I can check up on things there, and I'm also -- I'm going to make a few changes in the way I work."

"New York?" his grandfather said in surprise. "Oh, so now you see the light. For years, your mother and I begged you to stay stateside, but you wanted nothing of it -- it had to be Europe."

JC shrugged. "It's just -- I changed my mind."

"I see that, but why?"

"I don't know," JC said, suddenly annoyed. "Maybe I'm sick of travel; maybe I'm sick of the food. Maybe I want a little bit of consistency in my life for once."

His grandfather nodded, then hardened his gaze. "You want to be in New York, I'll keep you in New York. But what are the rest of these changes?"

"I need to be in more control of my time, the hours I put in," JC said carefully. "I'm not going to go back to the way things were before, not going to do nothing but live for the company."

His grandfather's stare filled with amazement, and for a moment JC experienced keen discomfort. Even as an adult he sometimes still felt vulnerable under the old man's scrutiny.

"So you want to ease up a bit."

"Yes," JC calmly told him, then nearly winced as his grandfather shifted uncomfortably in his chair, obviously perplexed.

"Joshua, is there something -- are you -- you're all right, of course," his grandfather gruffly said, and as he registered the worry and distress in the old man's voice, JC was filled with guilt.

"No, no. Nothing like that," he quickly said. "I'm fine."

His grandfather heaved a huge sigh, then shook his head. "Yes, well, that's good," he said a bit weakly, and then quickly caught hold of himself again, pausing once more to study JC, his eyes now narrowing and growing mercenary.

"This time last year, Joshua, you were hungry as ever, eager to start a new challenge, eager to do whatever it took to keep the press going. So I guess I'm left to wonder what's prompted this switch in attitude."

JC kept his voice distant and his eyes hard. "You've known me my whole life. What do you think?"

"I think you wouldn't be asking for special treatment like this if there weren't something eating at you, if something hadn't changed."

Incredulity swept over JC, along with an intense need to redirect the conversation. "All I'm asking for is a little more time to myself and a little less time spent traveling. It's hardly extravagant."

"Oh, I see." His grandfather was beginning to look vaguely amused, which was downright infuriating.

"What do you see?" JC demanded. This conversation was starting to spiral out of control, and he didn't like it.

Smiling to himself, his grandfather stretched back in his chair, his eyes wide and apparently guileless -- though JC knew better.

"It just makes a person wonder, Joshua. Usually when I have a young executive wanting to cut back on his responsibilities, it has to do with affairs of the heart." His grandfather gave JC a significant look, and horror spread through JC, because that was definitely not -- in no way had he meant --

His grandfather chuckled softly, looking downright philosophical now. "People fall in love and they want to settle down. They don't want to be far away from the object of their affections -- they start looking for stability in the workplace. And I have to confess, Joshua, I'd started to wonder about you, started to wonder whether you were ever going to --"

"Grandpa, don't. I don't -- I --" JC fell silent again and only just managed to keep his expression neutral as thoughts of Justin filled his mind, and along with those, a rush of complicated, unsettling emotions. Suddenly, it was all he could do to keep from trembling right there in the restaurant. Clenching his fists tightly in his lap, JC struggled to remain silent, to seem unruffled. Of course he wasn't doing this to spend more time with anyone. He was perfectly aware of all of his actions and motivations, and there was quite simply no way in hell he was preoccupied with "affairs of the heart." His desire to spend more time in the city had absolutely nothing to do with that and everything to do with --

"So, Joshua," his grandfather magnanimously continued, "I guess the only logical place this brings me to is this: Are you involved with someone?"

"What?"

JC watched his grandfather's indulgent smile in utter disbelief, fervently wishing that he could leave his body entirely and float somewhere easy and calm and above it all, looking down almost with pity at poor, confused Joshua Chasez.

But there was no escape from himself right now, no escape from the painful realization that was even now pressing at the edges of his mind and into his heart. JC tried with almost crazed desperation to keep himself calm, to keep his feelings in check, to keep his face expressionless, because even as he looked defiantly at his grandfather, his mind and heart were filled with the ridiculous, embarrassing knowledge that maybe he did have an ulterior motive in all of this, that maybe he was acting purposefully -- and that maybe, just maybe, his behavior had everything in the world to do with Justin Timberlake.

Oh god. What was he going to do?

"Fine, fine. Be that way." His grandfather laughed heartily and took another drink. "But I will tell you this -- whoever this mystery person is, I'm guessing you don't quite have things worked out with her, or you'd be a little more forthcoming."

Relying on all the self-control techniques he'd ever learned in his life, JC slowly, steadily raised eyes to meet his grandfather. He could play this off; he had a few good stares of his own.

"Or him," the old man added, shrugging, missing entirely the point of JC's glare, which had been intended, god damn it, to shut him up. "You might think I don't know these things, Joshua, but I do. I'm not as old fashioned as you think I am. Your grandmother saw to that."

"I don't care what you think you know --" JC began sharply to cover his embarrassment, but let it drop when his grandfather raised an eyebrow in warning.

"Look -- the only thing that really matters to me is that you're happy." His grandfather gave him an intense, fond look, and after a second of frozen disbelief, JC slowly nodded.

"Well, that and that you're making me money. And if you can do both of those things at the same time, then I've got no complaints."

"And I appreciate that, I do, but really, Grandpa, there's not --" JC broke off for a second, astonished into silence as he realized that he was going to be unable to finish the lie.

"Really, I'm not that close with anyone right now," JC rapidly, unconvincingly mumbled just to spite himself.

"You're lying, Joshua," his grandfather mildly said, and JC did flush then, and took a drink to calm himself, trying to figure out how much he'd revealed and how much ground he'd lost.

Anger filled him then, and a keen sense of injustice. None of this was his grandfather's business. He didn't have to know who Justin Timberlake was, and he certainly didn't have to know how intricately and confusingly Justin and JC were bound together. Even if this were a matter of the heart . . . and here JC felt himself start to unravel again, because dear god, it was, it absolutely was -- this entire thing was patently obvious, and he almost couldn't believe how stubbornly he'd been refusing to see what was right in front of him. He was utterly helpless in the face of his feelings for Justin.

As another wave of agony swept over him, JC quickly drew himself together, trying to answer his grandfather, but all he could do was think about how he was now increasingly unable to stop looking at Justin, to stop looking for him -- every day now, it seemed, he wandered up and down the halls of Phoenix Press, hoping against hope that he would run into Justin, that he could bask for a moment in the radiance of his smile.

And it was worse than that, even. The longing he had always felt for Justin, ever since he'd first laid eyes on him, had somehow grown to almost unbelievable levels -- it had mutated, deepened into something far more complicated and unsettling than lust. And JC wasn't quite

sure when or where that had happened -- in the conference room? over the phone while he'd been in Europe? in the deep silence before the fireplace at his cabin?

Really, there was no way to pinpoint it, and there was no easy word for the amalgam of fondness, yearning, and tenderness JC knew that he now felt for Justin, no simple way to control it, define it or write it off. All his attempts to push his feelings to the side, to ignore them, or to quell them had failed miserably.

That meant only one thing: he was going to have to find the courage either to put those feelings to rest or to explore them. JC slowly unclenched his fists and stared for a moment at his plate. For the first time in his life, JC realized, he was hoping for Christmas to be over soon, was hoping like hell to get out of Phoenix and back to the parent company -- because the passing of Christmas would signal the end of his tenure as Justin's boss. And once that happened, there might possibly be room for . . . for . . .

For something else. JC didn't yet have the nerve or the words for it, but the possibility was still there, vague and yet undeniable. With each passing second, JC felt his urge to connect with Justin, to figure out what could happen between them, grow stronger.

But again -- this was none of his grandfather's business. Coughing roughly to conceal his embarrassment, JC took a long drink, and then said, "I had some figures from Europe I wanted to share with you."

"Excellent," his grandfather said warmly, obviously still more than a little amused at JC's discomposure, but he remained silent and waiting as JC bent down to pull out the report he'd prepared for his grandfather and then handed it across the table.

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Everyone crowded into the library, not for a party this time but for an all-staff meeting. JC hadn't convened all that many of these during his tenure -- he was so involved in the workings of various departments that he probably hadn't felt it necessary. But sometimes it was good to have everyone together, Justin thought as he scanned the other faces in the room and listened to bits and pieces of conversations going on around him.

It was funny how departments tended to sit together even though there were no rules about that. Near Justin were Elise, Nick Carter, and Karen Anderson, all of them talking animatedly and vividly; to the left of their group was the manuscript editorial department. Across the room was Chris's crew, all of them in bright colors and with strange hair; behind them were the strange, repressed business types. Publishing tended to collect unbalanced, eclectic people, Justin thought, which was probably why JC sometimes seemed so out of place among them. Not that JC wasn't unusual -- sometimes he was so unfathomable Justin could hardly find words to describe him -- but on the outside, he was every bit the polished businessman in his perfectly cut suits and hand-sewn shoes.

He was in gray today, his white shirt crisp, a discreetly shimmering tie knotted perfectly at his throat. It was hard to reconcile this formal, proper JC with the more relaxed and at ease version of him Justin had seen at his cabin -- JC was so good at blending in and out of various social situations. Justin watched him flipping lazily through his notes, watched him

reach up to rub his neck, and then slowly stopped breathing and cast down his eyes in embarrassment when JC looked up and caught him staring, his eyes crinkling ever so faintly in what might have been amusement.

Justin coughed uncomfortably and looked down at his hands, then glanced over at his colleagues. They were in the middle of a vicious, satisfied conversation about the latest industry gossip -- that Fitzgerald Random's fall list had tanked -- however, and Justin didn't really want to participate in that right now.

"What's wrong with you?" Chris asked, ignoring the informal by-department seating arrangement and dragging a chair up to Justin's to sit next to him.

"What? I'm fine." Justin sat up straight in his chair and smiled back at Chris. "Just thinking about all the shit I could be doing instead of sitting here in a meeting is all."

"Ah." Chris glanced speculatively at JC. "Putting aside for the moment your insane refusal to appreciate anything that takes you away from real work, I should probably remind you that the person who called this meeting is probably the least likely individual in the universe to waste time, so I'm guessing he's probably got something important to say -- and I'll bet it's about the search for the new director."

"Yeah," Justin agreed, then lowered his voice and spoke quickly to Chris. "Did you hear Elise was thinking about applying?"

"I sure did." Chris settled back in his chair, grinning. "And if she doesn't get it, there's no justice in the world."

"She hasn't directed a press before," Justin muttered, glancing carefully over at the graceful curve of Elise's neck, listening to her pleasant, ringing laughter, "but she knows this place so well."

"And look what she's done for your sad division -- look what good shape acquisitions is in now," Chris said, impatiently brushing off Justin's words of protest. "I think she's probably the best person in the world to pick up this job and run with it."

"I just hope --" Justin cast a furtive look at JC, who'd been corralled by a member of the business department, and suppressed a sigh. "I hope JC sees it that way, too."

"You still don't trust him, do you?" Chris's voice was a mixture of fondness and impatience, and it made Justin flush a little.

"Most of the time, his instincts are perfect," Justin said softly, and slowly sank his teeth into his lower lip for one excruciating moment as he watched JC smiling and laughing. "But he's also kind of . . . bloodless when it comes to decision-making, you know? I just -- I hope he'd be willing to take a chance on her."

"Jesus, Justin, you've worked with a man for almost a year now. If you can't appreciate by this time that he knows how to gamble, then quite frankly, I'm going to have to call your much-vaunted people skills into question."

"My people skills are absolutely --" Justin began and then shook his head and gave up as Chris turned away from him to heckle one of the designers. For a moment, Justin sat perfectly still, trying to be calm, patient, and professional, but inevitably the urge to look once more at JC seized him. Oh, he wanted to do it, but as of late, looking at JC had gotten a little more complicated than it used to be. For as long as he could remember Justin had snuck guilty, furtive looks at him, mostly because he couldn't stop himself from doing it, but the past several times he'd done it, it seemed that more often than not, JC was looking right back at him, his face thoughtful, his gaze steady and measured. It felt very much as if JC were searching for something, trying to find an answer somewhere in Justin's eyes or in his face, but each time their eyes met, Justin felt such a rush of excitement and uneasiness that he had to look down or away. It was simply too distressing trying to figure out what was going on in JC's head, particularly given the fact that JC looked with appreciation at so many people, did it, as Justin knew now only too well, instinctively and reflexively. He was deeply and unconsciously seductive, and to be taken in by that yet again would be beyond idiotic.

And yet the urge to look was so strong. Even just sitting still and contemplating it was strangely exhilarating, because what if JC were looking back again? Justin breathed quickly in and out and then gave in to the urge, slowly lifted his head and set eyes on JC only to gasp quietly to himself as he met and held curious silver-blue eyes, then took in JC's grave, cautious smile. Immediately Justin felt his face heat up, and he knew he should look away at once, knew that he should stop this adolescent behavior, but the longer he looked into JC's eyes, the harder his heart beat and the closer he came to trembling outright. He was so, so beautiful, and he was watching Justin just as closely as he was watching him. What was going on in his mind? What could he possibly be thinking?

Mostly likely, he was thinking about his speech, Justin thought in disappointment a second later as without missing a beat or betraying any emotion whatsoever, JC smoothly turned away from him and stood up to call the meeting to order.

Justin leaned forward a little in his chair as JC went through the standard all-staff meeting opening talk: sales figures, overall health of the list, talk about rewards and reviews and upcoming author appearances. He knew that he seemed attentive and alert, but Justin's mind was guiltily, compulsively preoccupied with tallying up all the looks he'd exchanged lately with JC. There had been several brief, intense moments of eye contact in the hallways, and at least twice during meetings there had been longer, more unsettling glances. Always, JC remained controlled, but there was something in his looks -- amusement? speculation? excitement? -- that made it impossible for Justin to write it off entirely, even knowing JC's penchant for flirting.

When the individual department heads stood up to report, Justin started to pay closer attention to the meeting. Elise Martin spoke quickly and efficiently for the whole of acquiring, and then everyone laughed when Chris stood up, staring at her in awe, and said, "Now that was a report!" before moving into his own. After Chris there was manuscript editorial, marketing, production, and business: then the focus shifted back to JC.

"Before I let you go, there's something I wanted to tell you all," he said. Out of the corner of his eye, Justin saw Mark, JC's assistant, fidgeting rather unhappily, and he gave him a small,

sympathetic smile. Everyone knew that JC would soon be departing, but no one seemed very happy about it.

"As many of you know, the job search for the new director of the press is well under way," JC said, then looked carefully around the room, meeting eyes with anyone who dared look back. "We have some very distinguished, very qualified candidates, and I promise to get someone in here who will care about this press the way that you do, someone knowledgeable in business matters but who also understands the mission behind the kind of publishing you people want to do. To that end, I'm going to need input from all of you, and so I want everyone, whether or not you'll actually interview the candidates yourselves, to review the resumes and give me any thoughts you might have about them."

Suddenly, Derek Thompson stood up, his thin face and body practically radiating with determination. JC frowned a little in surprise, then said, "Derek?"

"I just wanted to say . . . I believe I'm speaking for a large number of people when I say -- when I suggest, rather, that no one here would be upset if you simply decided to halt the search altogether and just stay on." As Derek sank back into his seat, Justin scanned the room, a strange elation filling him as he watched several heads nodding in agreement.

There was a slight tinge on JC's cheeks.

"Thank you, Derek. I'm flattered -- truly." JC ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat, obviously collecting himself.

"My obligations to the parent company of this press make it impossible for me to stay, but before I go, I'm going to give you the very best director I can. And even when I'm gone, don't think that I won't still be looking in on you from time to time. Believe me, I'm going to remain very interested in what's going on at this press."

As he said that, JC looked right at Justin, and for a moment, Justin heard nothing and saw nothing, and it was a struggle not to shudder under the intensity of those clear, blue eyes. JC would be watching.

Justin really didn't pay attention to the rest of the meeting. JC took a few more awkward questions, then quickly got them all out of there. Before he stood up, Justin glanced at his watch. JC had made sure this meeting took only half an hour, but Justin had a feeling that the repercussions from it would last far longer than that.

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"Same again?" Chris asked, gesturing to Justin's gin and tonic and looking expectantly at him. Justin took stock: it was now six thirty and he hadn't had dinner, but he was having a considerable amount of fun here with Chris and he didn't want it to end, even though the bar was packed and loud. They were in a fairly secluded booth, the drinks were good, and Chris was buying. Really, there was no bad about it.

"Yeah," he said, and watched Chris weave his way through the crowd of people to the bar. It had been a long, draining day, so when Chris had suggested that they come here after work,

Justin had jumped at the chance. Besides, he wanted a chance to talk with Chris about the same thing everyone had been talking about all day: the shortlist of the three candidates for the director position. JC had called another staff meeting today to disseminate the resumes and inform everyone when the candidates would be interviewing, smiling wryly as he realized that almost everyone in the room was frantically flipping through the resumes and murmuring Elise's name instead of listening to him. It was a huge relief to see that she had made the final cut -- all day there had been speculative conversations about the candidates, which only served to increase the level of tension.

It was almost mid December now, and there was palpable anxiety throughout the press concerning JC's departure. JC seemed serene and above it all, but Justin knew for a fact that he was working an insane number of hours trying to pull things together, that he'd been having meetings with everyone to form plans for the change in power, and that he was compiling what was sure to be an intimidating and voluminous set of notes for the new person to use when he or she came in. Whatever he did, JC did it thoroughly and right, and even though he didn't want JC to be leaving, Justin had to admire the way he was doing it.

"Drink it quick," Chris said as he took his seat again, quickly sliding a tall, thin glass across the table toward him. "You look far too worried to be in a bar."

Justin laughed. "It's just this job search shit," he said. "I mean, on top of everything else."

"Yeah," Chris said. "December is insane anyway what with Christmas coming up. I mean, with all you editorial sorts trying to get your projects through before the press holiday party, yeah. It's probably pretty tough."

"What we should be, Chris? Not printers or typesetters," Justin said, referring to the fact that printers and typesetters were notorious for closing down early in December, not to appear again until the beginning of January. Anyone who wanted a book out early in the next year had to do some careful planning and scrambling, and there were always a few people caught in the crunch.

Chris laughed. "You wouldn't last five minutes in a job that didn't have a fancy expense account," he said, and then laughed harder as Justin widened his eyes in injury.

"I do not! I do not abuse that! Every author lunch I'd ever comped was legit, Chris, absolutely in the press's best interest, and I --"

"Stop, stop --" Chris said, leaning back, gasping and then pausing to wipe his eyes. "It's too prodding you into righteous indignation, you know that? You fall for it every single time!"

"Ass," Justin hissed, and then grinned in spite of himself and took a huge gulp of his drink. They talked a little about the upcoming holiday party -- it was to be held at JC’s penthouse, a nice contrast to last year’s sad gathering at a local steakhouse -- and pretty soon after that, their glasses were empty, and this time it was Justin's turn to weave through the crowd to get more. He caught up with a couple of marketing girls at the bar, joked with them for a minute, then returned to Chris.

"So, the final candidates," Chris said, drawing his eyebrows together. "You think Elise can hold her own?"

Justin sighed. "It's going to be close. The other two have more publishing experience, but Elise is the only one who can speak knowledgeably about this press."

"Yeah," Chris agreed. "The interviews are going to be pretty important."

Justin rested his elbow on the table, cupping his chin in his hand. "Well, Elise is nothing if not well spoken, so I think she has a fighting chance."

"Absolutely." Chris took a long drink of beer, wiped his mouth in satisfaction, then said, "And how's the music department's job search going? Any good candidates for your old job?"

"I looked through a stack of resumes this afternoon," Justin said, "and there are definitely some possibilities, but the people I want to bring in for interviews are kind of scattered across the country, so I think I'm going to wait until the new year to interview. But once that comes, I'm going to be right on it. I can't keep up this pace much longer."

Chris nodded. "You've kind of been running ragged lately. I mean, last week alone, there were at least three days where your hair didn't look perfect. That more than anything tells me that you've been under some stress."

Justin rolled his eyes and treated Chris to a rude gesture.

"Oooooh," Chris said in mock affront, then laughed when Justin repeated the gesture with both hands.

"Actually, know what's funny about all this?" Justin asked suddenly. "If we had started out this way with JC -- if we'd had to interview him, I mean -- I doubt we would have hired him at all."

Chris frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Oh, we hated him at first," Justin said, laughing as he remembered the many whispered, indignant comments Joey had made about JC at the onset. "He didn't exactly make a very good impression, or even try to, for that matter. He just -- he was so fucking cold, you know?"

Chris widened his eyes in mock astonishment. "Oh no. Not our JC. Tell me it isn't so."

Justin grinned. "It took us a bit of time to see his strengths is all I'm saying, and frankly -- well, I think he's been a great director, really, really good."

Chris looked steadily at him. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Justin. I have to confess that I haven't always been sure what you thought about him, particularly these past few months."

Justin took a quick drink to collect himself. "Yeah. Things got complicated for a while."

"I know, and I just -- well. It's a shame, you know? A shame for both of you," Chris said quietly, and Justin felt butterflies flutter in his stomach, because Chris sounded as if he knew, as if he were intimately familiar with what had gone on between him and JC.

"I, uh, was pretty annoyed with him for a while, but I think things are okay now. I mean, I think we have a perfectly good working relationship," Justin said rather pointedly, placing a slight but unmistakable emphasis on "working," and then added, "And to be perfectly frank, I wish he weren't leaving."

"Of course you do, but it's still going to happen, Justin."

"I know, I know." Justin sat back, suddenly annoyed by the gentleness in Chris's voice, and took another drink. "I mean, it's not like I'm gong to cry about it or anything --"

"Cry about what?" a familiar voice said, and Justin looked daggers at Chris, absolute daggers, as JC, a drink in his hand, appeared at the end of their table, his eyes moving curiously back and forth between them. And did they linger on Justin for just a moment longer than was necessary? It was impossible to be sure, but Justin breathed in deeply nonetheless.

"Hey, man -- have a seat," Chris said, and JC settled himself next to him in the booth.

"How's it going?" Chris congenially asked.

"What aren't you going to cry about?" JC asked Justin.

"Oh, it's just -- I --" Justin began uncomfortably, because although JC's eyes were warm with amusement, he also looked as if he weren't just going to let this slide.

"For god's sake, Justin, just tell him!" Chris said, and jostled JC's arm, trying to divert his attention from Justin. "Justin here's not going to cry if Elise Martin won't go out with him, even though he's had a crush on her for months now."

"Chris!" Justin said, aghast. JC was still staring at him, but now his brow was wrinkled a little in puzzlement.

"What? It's better to get it out in the open, isn't it?" Chris was practically cackling in amusement now, his eyes dark with crazed glee. "I mean, sure, she's married, but that doesn't mean what it used to anymore, now does it?"

"It's not Elise. I don't have a crush on Elise," Justin mumbled to JC in a low and almost pained voice, because suddenly it was the most important thing in the world to let JC know that he had not moved on to someone else, that his affections had not yet been directed elsewhere.

"I know you don't," JC calmly said, and the confidence in his voice very nearly made Justin list to the side. He was drunk and JC was looking particularly handsome tonight, his tie loosened at his throat, his hair shining in the warm light of the bar, eyelashes long and dark against his cheek as he looked down at his drink for a moment.

"So we were thinking about your list of three," Chris said, and finally JC let Justin off the hook, looked easily over at Chris and said, "And?"

"And Elise, man. It has to be Elise. You'd be batshit crazy to pick anyone else." Chris spoke forcefully and determinedly, his eyes boring into JC, and Justin shook his head in frustration as JC smiled a little but remained otherwise entirely unreadable. Of course he would refuse to tip his hand.

"Is that what you think too?" JC quietly asked Justin.

"Well. I mean, the other two -- they've got experience, but --"

"More experience than Elise does," JC lightly observed, and Justin felt himself begin to tense.

"They have a certain kind of experience," he shot back. "They might know publishing in the abstract --"

"Or have directed other presses themselves," JC pointed out, and Justin grew even more eager to make his point, to convince JC.

"Okay, okay, sure, but that -- that kind of thing can be learned fairly quickly," Justin began, and then, when he caught the amused, doubtful look in JC's eyes, added, "or, if not quickly, at least -- well, it's not impossible. But Elise -- Elise has been at Phoenix forever, JC, and she's -- the things she knows about this place take years to pick up, you know? In my mind, her history here outweighs any inexperience she might have in other areas."

JC tilted his head and said nothing.

"Oh no. No, Chasez. You are not going to do this to us -- you are not going to saddle us with some stranger who knows nothing about how we do things," Chris said.

"I didn't know much about how things were done when I first started at Phoenix," JC softly said, and Chris let out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Okay, Justin -- that thing you said about him earlier? I now see exactly what you mean."

"Damn it, Chris!" Justin exhaled, because now JC was looking rather intensely at him, and he was suddenly filled with terror that JC was going to think that he was still angry with him.

Turning away from Justin, JC asked Chris, "What did he say about me?"

His tone was light, but it was most decidedly not an innocent question, and as he watched Chris prepare to answer, Justin held his breath. Please don't ruin this for me, he silently begged Chris. Not when I've come so far.

"Oh, Justin wasn't slamming you," Chris said, his eyes beaming with devilish amusement. "He just shared with me the fact that at the beginning of your tenure here, your fan club was, er, rather small. So to speak."

"I'm quite sure it was, given that I came in and fired people left and right," JC said quietly, his eyes steady on Justin's. He didn't look angry, but Justin still felt uneasy as he continued speaking. "And I've thought a lot about it since, even talked it over with someone --"

Here Justin felt his face burning

"--but I have to say," JC continued quietly "that I'd still do it all over again if I had the chance." Then he spoke even more slowly, his eyes locking with Justin's. "I made a lot of tough decisions, and I made some mistakes in executing them, but I always -- I always tried, at least, to act with the press's best interests in mind."

"Certain situations ended up being rather . . . complex," Justin quickly interrupted, mortified, because were they really going to have another Joey conversation? Did this really have to happen now of all times?

It was too painful to look at JC, so Justin directed his next remark to Chris. "But JC -- I think JC acted with integrity throughout," he said in a low voice, his face flushing as he felt JC watching him. "He wasn't -- there were just -- it was hard."

"Okay, so can we stop the heavy discussion?" Chris briskly said as Justin and JC looked at each other, Justin now unable to stop trembling as he saw something that looked a lot like warmth in JC's eyes. "'Cause that's really not where I wanted to take us tonight."

"It's just -- JC's been a good director," Justin breathed, now completely lost in the heat and the beauty of JC's eyes.

"Thanks, Justin," JC said after a short pause, and then slowly turned back to Chris and said, "So you're both backing Elise, I take it?"

"Absolutely," Chris firmly said, and the conversation slowly wended its way into less dangerous territory. Still, it took a long time for Justin's heart to stop pounding.

By the time the three of them stepped out into the chilly night air and filed toward various cars and cabs, Justin was practically throbbing with unwanted excitement, awash with tension and hyperaware of JC's every move, his every comment. After the three of them had veered away from discussing the job search, talk had gotten fast and loose, and they had all consumed -- or, rather, Justin had consumed -- a rather considerable amount of liquor. And maybe it was nothing but drunken optimism, but it had seemed to Justin that more than once tonight he'd gotten a glimpse of the old JC, had received looks and smiles that almost painfully threw him back several months and into a much happier time.

As he watched JC phoning his driver, the curve of his cheekbone elegant and beautiful under the streetlights, Justin longed to say something to him right now, something light and inviting, something that JC could, if he so chose, parlay into an invitation. Although they weren't looking at each other, Justin still felt a fine thread of tension between the two of them; however tenuous it was, it was a link, and Justin was loath to let it go to waste. And after all, given the way JC had looked at him at certain times this evening, he could very well be longing for the same thing.

But it was late and it was December and JC was leaving the press and Justin was drunk. Much better to show a little control now and not be humiliated yet again. Much better to avoid making an already complicated, painful situation even more complicated. Much better to avoid making everyone unhappy and uneasy.

Justin sighed audibly, not even caring when JC looked curiously at him, and flagged down a cab. Much better just to get in the car, blurt out his address, and hold his breath and wait for the ache in him to dissolve.

It was the best night out Justin had had in months.

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It was now barely half an hour before the guests would start arriving. JC knew that he should be talking to the party planner, tasting the food the catering service had brought, talking to the wait staff that had been hired, and looking around his penthouse to make sure everything was in order; instead, he was immobile before his mirror, unable to stop staring at himself. If he could just look long enough, he might finally be able to see it, might finally once and for all be able to figure out what had changed inside of him, what had made him so utterly, fatally vulnerable and confused. Surely, it must be written somewhere on his face -- maybe in his eyes, or in the curve of his mouth -- but as he scrutinized himself, all JC could see was what he saw every day, the completely familiar configuration of features and expression that formed the sum of his appearance.

It just seemed wrong that an uneasiness as large and overwhelming as his shouldn't show up somewhere on his face, or maybe in his body. JC peered closely at his arms, his legs, then focused on the corners of his eyes. Maybe he looked older now, more weary -- maybe there were new character lines etched into his skin. He certainly felt as if Justin had marked him.

But the JC Chasez in the mirror refused once more to differ appreciably from the way he'd always looked, and the real JC took a few steps backward, sighing, then sat on the edge of his bed to think. He had been on edge ever since his chat with his grandfather a couple of weeks ago, ever since he'd started to realize that he was much less in tune with his own motives and desires than he'd thought he'd been. God, he was coiled tight -- he could feel the tension radiating in him, could practically taste his anxiety on his tongue, an unpleasant flavor he couldn't get rid of no matter how hard he tried. There was a strange, manic energy inside him, something dangerous and willful, something JC wasn't sure he was going to be able to keep in check tonight.

JC looked unhappily around his bedroom and thought back to the first night he'd been with Justin, thought of how effortlessly and easily he'd choreographed that evening. The grace and precision he'd had throughout that encounter were now completely lost -- and to his surprise, JC couldn't quite figure out whether that was good or bad. He knew only too well by this time that Justin was not someone to be controlled, not someone who could be confined or predicted or set on an easy, simple course. Always, he surprised JC, always, he put him off balance. It had been a long time since anyone had been able to do that to JC, had been almost forever since anyone had made him feel so uneasy and so uncertain.

Again: was that good or bad? With almost maddening skill, Justin had somehow managed to wrest emotions out of JC that JC hadn't ever imagined or planned on feeling. He had reached something hungry and vulnerable deep inside him, had awakened in him an almost terrifying desire to connect, to be known, to get closer.

JC had spent a significant portion of his adult life trying to eradicate that small center of need and vulnerability, to prevent it from ever hurting or controlling him, and even now, as he yearned painfully and almost despairingly for Justin, he was unable to entirely dispel his sense of astonishment and wonder at the fact that he'd been caught like this. He hadn't wanted this complexity and confusion; he hadn't wanted this level of distress in his life.

But now that he had these feelings, there was no shutting them down. He'd certainly tried, but each and every time he thought he'd succeeded, all it had taken was a glance into Justin's eyes or a short, meaningless conversation with him to draw him back into the fray. He was perpetually disadvantaged now, almost crippled with this maddening, indelible need.

JC glanced at the clock. Only twenty minutes to go, and he really, really should leave this room, really should take responsibility for this party, but something held him still, kept him immersed in his thoughts.

If he were really being honest with himself, he'd have to admit that confusion wasn't the only thing that Justin had given him. It was not exactly pleasant to admit that he was indebted to Justin, but there was no way around it. Justin had done much more for him than make him weak.

It wasn't in JC's nature to think much about the definition of happiness. He had always set goals for himself, had moved purposefully toward them and then congratulated himself when he reached them, but he hadn't sat down to consider whether his efforts were worthwhile. They had brought him success, had enriched his family and furthered his professional interests, and so they certainly had meaning, but had they made him joyful? Had they given him peace or sustained him?

JC frowned. In many ways, yes, but only since he'd fallen for Justin had he been able to experience a host of other emotions, feelings that he wasn't so familiar with. Justin had somehow helped him to relax, to feel peace, to feel assured and comfortable in someone's affection. When he was with Justin, JC realized, he was secure and content, much less driven by ambition or competition. Those things were still there -- they'd always be a part of him, and they'd always bring him satisfaction -- but something about the way Justin made him feel had placed them in perspective, had somehow put in relief the all-encompassing seriousness of accumulating capital and forming deals.

When he was with Justin, it was all right just to be -- there wasn't such a need to order things, to win, to dominate and control. When he was with Justin, he could relax. When he was with Justin, in sum, JC quite simply became a different person from the one he'd been all his life. He became a better person.

But did he do the same for Justin? JC thought back to the series of power struggles and games he'd put him through, thought back to the many, many times he'd been directly responsible for placing the wounded, stunned look in Justin's eyes, thought of the many times

he'd cut him down, played with him, pushed him away. He'd bewildered and hurt Justin with such unerring consistency that it was a wonder Justin still even spoke to him.

Given that, it would take nothing short of a miracle for Justin to actually want to be close with JC again, JC glumly realized. He had done too much to hurt him, had pushed him away and thwarted him too many times -- and Justin wasn't the kind of man who would run into a brick wall twice. Justin was smarter than that. Justin deserved more than that.

JC got up and looked once more at himself in the mirror. Usually, he was supremely confident in his ability to attract and seduce -- for most of his life, he'd been doing it effortlessly and easily. But nothing he could do tonight, he now saw, would definitely bring Justin to him -- the texture of their relationship had become so complex that he was utterly unable to imagine a scene in which he might successfully bring him back. JC felt helpless and unsure, and along with that, a sense of fury at himself, fury at an opportunity lost, fury at having squandered something so important.

But Justin had been looking at him lately, hadn't he? JC shrugged a little at his reflection, then stood up straighter as the thought deepened. These past few weeks, in fact, Justin had been doing rather a lot to catch his attention, and JC let a faint smile cross his face as he thought of the tentative smiles Justin had been giving him, of the small and easily answered "important questions" he'd been bringing to him lately, the many lingering glances the two of them had exchanged in meetings, in hallways -- anywhere, really, now that he thought about it.

It was folly to cling to something so tenuous, but maybe Justin was receptive -- maybe Justin hadn't given up on him entirely. Maybe there was still hope.

With that thought, JC felt even more out of control, and the strange, cataclysmic energy that had been simmering in him all evening seemed even stronger, even less governable. He was in a dangerous, uneven state of mind -- exactly the way he didn't want to feel right before a work party, right before seeing the most confounding, unnerving person he'd ever known. Unless he kept a very tight grip on himself tonight, JC feared he'd do something almost outrageously stupid, something that would forever change his life.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, letting terror and hope seize him in equal proportion, playing out any number of scenarios in his mind, weighing various possibilities and strategies. None of them seemed viable, none of them seemed workable, and yet the animating energy in him was not assuaged.

Opening his eyes again, JC took a long, shuddering breath and stared disconsolately at himself. For the first time in his life, he didn't know what he was going to do.

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It had been almost exactly a year and a half, Justin thought, and now he found himself once again beside Lance in a cab, dressed up for a party and on his way to JC’s penthouse. There was an odd sense of deja vu about it, he thought uneasily as he checked the knot of his tie again. So many similarities, except this time there was a gentle snow falling instead of a hard rain. And Justin was a resident of the city now, not a visitor; and this time he was the invited

guest to the party, not a tagalong friend. And this time, Justin thought with a surge of nerves that made him clench his hands inside his coat pockets, this time he knew exactly who and what was waiting for him at the end of the ride.

Except that he totally didn't, he reminded himself sternly, and wiped his damp palms on his coat. The heated and happy months he'd spent with JC last summer paled in comparison to the stressful months before and after that, and it all seemed light years away on this cold winter night. Justin felt his stomach roll slightly with tension as he looked out the window at the storefronts festooned with holiday decorations.

In the last month he'd veered daily from hope to despair, depending on each day's interaction with JC. Often it was good -- they could deal with each other professionally and respectfully in meetings, and Justin was able to concentrate on the business in front of him. Since the conversation at JC's cabin the tension between them on work issues had completely disappeared. It was a relief, Justin thought, a huge relief to know that JC didn't doubt his commitment to the press, or his integrity with respect to his professional life. It certainly made for a more peaceful atmosphere, at the office anyway.

Over the past few weeks his need to try to connect with JC had driven him to seek him out at the press as often as possible -- sometimes on pretexts that were laughably transparent, things that he could have easily dealt with on his own, or via e-mail. JC was always polite, even more than polite, sometimes he seemed actually pleased to see Justin and always took his questions seriously. But when Justin tried to tentatively move the conversation into more personal avenues, just to gauge JC's reactions . . . Justin stared blindly out the window, his brow creasing. JC was always courteous, and sometimes Justin thought he might be more than just courteous, sometimes he seemed receptive to more.

But other times he seemed distracted, unapproachable, impervious to Justin's tentative attempts to reach him. Justin knew he was over thinking the situation, but sometimes JC seemed like he was no longer interested in Justin, and the pain of that sliced deep.

But there had been more than a few times recently when he'd glance at JC in a meeting to find those blue eyes firmly fixed on his own face, when the lambent, lazy expression in them caused Justin's heart to thud wildly before jumping into his throat. Or the times when he'd pass JC in the hallway and JC would give him a slow, private smile, just like he had the previous summer. And for a split second Justin could almost believe that the events of the fall hadn't taken place.

But they had, he reminded himself tiredly as settled back in his seat and sighed. They had both made a number of mistakes, and a relationship that had perhaps been wrong in the first place had been ruined. If he could just get over him. If he'd only been able to restrain himself around JC in the very beginning, Justin thought morosely, he wouldn't be going through these huge highs and lows now.

But the grim fact was that he was not over JC, not by a long shot. Friends had tried to set him up on dates; he'd even forced himself to go out a time or two, but his heart wasn't in it. Nobody else appealed to him, no one else interested him, and until he was able to forget JC, Justin knew, there was really no point in trying. And he was a long, long way from forgetting.

But it wasn't all his fault, he reminded himself. JC was giving him mixed signals, or at least Justin sometimes thought he was getting mixed signals. Some of the things he'd said to Justin lately had led him to cautiously hope that maybe things could be different between them, that maybe, just maybe their relationship outside of work could be repaired.

But it would take time and effort, and while Justin was more than willing to put in the effort, time was something he felt like he just didn't have. After tonight's holiday party, most of the press was closing down until after the new year. Justin himself was leaving for Memphis in two days, and when he returned to work there would be a new director ready to step in and JC would be gone, back to Antaeus, back to Europe. Although he'd expressed interest in keeping up with things at Phoenix after the first of the year, Justin couldn't believe that he'd be able to keep that promise, or that he'd even want to after he was reabsorbed into the global conglomerate and all its intrigues. After tonight, Justin thought with another clenching of nerves in his stomach, after tonight he didn't know when he'd see JC again, if ever.

So what was he going to do about it? Justin asked himself tensely as the cab pulled up in front of JC's building. It irritated him to be so unsure of himself -- it really wasn't like him at all. Normally he wouldn't think twice about it, there was nothing wrong with making a straightforward proposition. But he wanted so much more from JC than another one-night stand, he thought sadly as he handed the driver his fare. The stakes here were so very high, and Justin was cautious and wary of being hurt again. He'd been disappointed and wounded so many times.

Lance was waiting for him on the curb as he slowly climbed out of the cab, his smile easy but his eyes concerned. "Are you sure you're up for this?" he asked quietly as the doorman ushered them through the front entrance.

Justin started to offer an automatic assent, and then stopped with a little laugh. "I don't know, honestly," he said quietly as the were led to the private penthouse elevator. "It's a work function, but it's at JC's house. I kind of don't know what to do with myself."

"Well, he was your boss before he was your boyfriend," Lance replied.

"Yeah, but he was a one-night stand before he was my boss," Justin muttered, and Lance snickered evilly.

"Try to put all of that out of your mind," he advised Justin as they stepped into the elevator and waited for the doors to close. "The last thing you want to do is make your co-workers think you're too comfortable in the boss's penthouse, you know what I mean?"

"Tough to do," Justin said with a wry twist of his lips. "Although, actually I don't think I've even been here more than a couple of times. Usually he was over at my place."

Lance's eyes examined the mahogany walls and discreet touches of brass as the elevator sped silently upward. "That's something I will never understand," he said, checking the knot of his tie in the mirrored door. "Why someone like him would prefer being in your apartment to a place like this . . ."

"Well, shit, Lance. Maybe it was the company," Justin said meaningfully, and threw an elbow that Lance dodged with the ease of long practice.

"It certainly wasn't your tasteful decor," he laughed, and then sobered a little, looking carefully at Justin as the elevator started to move. "Look, Justin, I know you've had a rough couple of months, but maybe it's better this way, don't you think?" Justin stared at him and Lance shifted uneasily before continuing. "I mean, you know I only say this out of concern, but seriously, the two of you didn't have any sort of common ground outside of the office. Things probably wouldn't have worked out anyway, right?"

Justin took a deep breath, the shapeless anxiety churning his stomach turning to determination as the elevator moved swiftly upward. "I don't know about that," he said slowly. "I think if this whole thing with Joey hadn't happened, well. I don't know. Maybe that's the problem, maybe that's why I've had so much trouble moving on these last couple of months. But you know, it's not just since Joey got fired -- the truth is that I haven't been much interested in anyone else since I first met JC a year and a half ago."

Lance stared at him. "So, what are you saying?"

Justin shrugged, looking up at the lights as the elevator passed floor after floor. "I don't really know," he admitted. "I don't know if it would've worked out or not, or if I could grab a second chance with him. But I think," he paused, taking a deep breath to ease the pressure in his chest. "I think I have to find out. I'm afraid that after tonight I might not ever have another chance."

Lance turned to him, obviously concerned. He was about to speak when the elevator door slid open soundlessly, and in addition to the silent butler waiting to take their heavy winter coats they found Chris, who greeted them with a smirk.

"Saw you coming in as I got on the elevator," he said. "Ready for another wild orgy at Chez Chasez?"

Justin choked over his greeting and almost swallowed his tongue as Lance laughed and stepped in smoothly. "Oh, I think we're ready for almost anything," he replied with a smile. He held his hand out, meeting Chris's eyes with a smile while Justin tried to recover. "We met at the reception," he said. "Lance Bass."

"Yes, I remember. Chris Kirkpatrick," Chris replied with what seemed to Justin almost unnatural politeness. "You still chaperoning this boy around town?"

"He's almost ready to be let out on his own," Lance confided as they started down the hallway toward the loud voices and music. "He's just a bumpkin from Tennessee, but I think he's come a long way this year."

Chris was laughing and Justin was rolling his eyes when they came to the end of the hallway and Lance and Justin stopped dead at the top of the stairs.

"Huh," Lance said, his brow furrowing as he looked around the room. "Is it just me, or does this place . . ."

"Look completely and utterly different," Justin breathed, his eyes wide. "I don't believe it." The room that Justin had remembered as white and cold and sterile had been transformed: the walls were painted a rich amber and instead of acres of white carpet there were hardwood floors and thick, colorful area rugs.

Chris had paused two steps down and looked up at them, cocking his head quizzically. "Oh," he said with elaborate and insincere surprise. "Why Justin, I had no idea you'd even been here before! How did you know JC had had some renovations done?"

Justin blinked stupidly, momentarily taken aback, and again Lance cut in smoothly. "Oh, we were both here about a year and a half ago," he said, guileless and wide-eyed in a way that Justin had always envied. "The firm I work for was invited here for some pre-opera benefit thing, and Justin was in town at the time, job hunting."

"Is that right?" Chris said with a sly glance at Justin's reddening face. "All that time ago, imagine that." He turned his attention back to Lance. "It seems that you and I have some notes to compare. Why don't you come with me to find the alcohol," Chris invited, "and tell me all about it? We can leave Justin here to gape in peace."

Justin sighed. "Happy holidays to you too, Chris," he said wryly as they grinned at him and started to move away, into the crowded room.

The room was full of light and people and music, and from the other side of the room Justin heard someone call his name. He should go down the stairs, mingle, greet his host, but for a moment he stood on the top stair and just looked at the big, warm room, trying to catalogue the changes.

It was more than the walls and the floor, he noted, it was more than the addition of the huge and beautiful Christmas tree in the curve of the stairs to his right, sparkling with colorful lights and delicate ornaments. The dimensions of the entire room seemed subtly different, he thought as he finally nudged himself into motion and began to slowly descend the steps. The fireplace on the far wall seemed much larger, with a mantle made of oak that spanned the entire wall instead of shiny white marble. But he knew, he absolutely knew that the walls on either side of the old fireplace had once been a plain and stark white. He stared at the wood shelves and what looked like a collection of antique books of all shapes and sizes. He wanted a closer look, he wanted to see what sort of books JC -- or JC's decorator -- had put in this room . . .

"Justin!" came a jovial voice, and he tore his fascinated gaze away from the far wall to greet Jerry, the press's production manager.

"How is it you don't have anything to drink yet?" Jerry was already grinning and pleasantly flushed. "You wouldn't believe the quality of the alcohol here, Justin, honestly!"

Sure I would, Justin thought with a flicker of smugness that he immediately squashed, hiding it under a grin. "Well, I just got here, actually," he started, and laughed as Jerry grabbed a glass from the tray carried by a passing waiter and presented it to him with a flourish. "Uh, never mind," he murmured as he took the glass and clinked it against Jerry's. "Cheers."

"Merry Christmas, Justin," Jerry responded with a slap on his shoulder that threatened to spill Justin's drink all over his hand. "Congratulations on a great year."

"Oh, hey," he said, smiling. "Same to you. You guys had a really good year too."

"We all did," Jerry said, gesturing expansively around the crowded room. "The whole press did, and I really feel that it's, you know, because of guys like you." He fixed Justin with an almost-serious look, eyebrows pulling together over his eyes. "You're the guys that bring in the books that sell, and this year, man, you really stepped up."

Justin blushed, embarrassed and ridiculously pleased as they clinked glasses again and he took a sip, and then a longer pull of, oh yes, the excellent, excellent champagne. Linda from marketing approached and there was another toast before she introduced her husband, and for a while Justin was lost in a flurry of greetings and holiday wishes. His eyes started to roam the room, peering through the crowd for JC, whom he felt certain was close by. In the back of his head he started to wonder how he would be able to get JC alone for a few minutes in this crush of people, how he could possibly manage to have a private conversation with him. And what he would say to him, what he could say to him, and how JC would respond. His stomach jittered and he lifted his glass to his lips, gulping down the cool liquid.

"Hey." Jerry interrupted his reverie and jerked him back to the conversation. "Did you take a look at that book collection?"

"Oh my god," Linda said reverently. "Those books, those beautiful -- Justin, you have to see them."

"I saw from the stairs; I was actually just about to go over and take a closer look at . . ."

"Justin," said another delighted voice, and Justin pulled his eyes away from the seductive bookcase across the room to greet a couple of people from the business office. They had finger foods on little plates that looked absolutely delicious and smelled even better, and Justin's stomach gave a rumble of hope. He looked up for a waiter and there, across the room by the window -- Justin felt his heart stutter with nerves and hunger as he spied their host.

JC was lean and elegant in his black suit, his hair shining and perfect, his eyes brilliant even from across the room. Justin stared for a moment -- JC was speaking with a group from manuscript editorial and dear God, was it possible that he was making them laugh? Justin blinked hard and it was true, Derek and even Jane Perillo were both smiling and nodding at something JC was saying and then the whole group burst into laughter, honest to goodness *laughter* as JC grinned and took a sip of his champagne, easing himself away as they turned to each other and continued talking. Justin shook his head in admiration and amusement. He didn't think he'd ever seen anyone from manuscript editorial happy. Maybe miracles really did happen during the holidays.

More people were arriving, pouring into the room with cheerful greetings as the noise level rose steadily. JC had been stopped by another group further across the room and Justin hesitated, anticipation and dread warring within him as he considered whether to try to approach JC now. His nerves won and he decided to wait, maybe until after he had some food

in his stomach to go along with the champagne. But first, he simply had to take a closer look at that rare book collection he was so curious about.

"Justin!" said a light voice at his elbow and Justin turned to greet Elise Martin, radiant in pretty red dress with her very handsome husband smiling at her side. Justin shook his hand and Elise leaned in to hug him gently as he wished them a happy holiday. Her eyes were sparkling with good cheer, and as her husband turned away to speak with Jerry she raised her glass to clink gently against Justin's.

"And a happy new year to you as well," she added as they sipped. Her smile was happy. "I understand you're leaving in a couple of days, so I won't see you until January, will I?"

"You're right," Justin said, deftly taking her empty glass with his own and trading them for full ones, handing hers to her with a smile. "I'm off to Memphis on Monday."

"Home to visit the family," she observed with a smile. "You must miss them."

Justin glimpsed JC moving slowly through the crowd over Elise's left shoulder and he tried to keep from staring, he really did. "Yeah, I do," he answered slowly, dragging his eyes away with an effort to smile down at Elise. "But honestly, if you'd told me a year ago that I would feel more at home in New York City than I do in the town I grew up in, I'd have told you you were crazy," he said wryly, and was rewarded by Elise's laughter.

"This city does grow on you," she agreed, and over her champagne glass her blue eyes were wickedly amused. "Especially if one has someone special to make it seem more welcoming, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh yes," Justin said, momentarily distracted by the distant sound of JC's voice. "I mean, no," he added. "I mean, I'm sure you're right," he finished with as much dignity as he could muster while Elise smiled at him and sipped her champagne.

"It's been quite a year, hasn't it?" she mused. "Some tough times early on, but I feel that the press is really hitting its stride, and I think that we have JC to thank for that, wouldn't you agree?"

"God, yes," Justin breathed, and then hurriedly added, "I mean, I hadn't been here very long before he took over, but it seemed that we were floundering a bit."

"Indeed," she said, leaning a little closer. "I have to admit I had my doubts at the beginning, but he certainly knew what he was doing."

"You had doubts too?" Justin asked in surprise. "Seriously?"

Elise's eyes watched him carefully. "I think we all did at first," she admitted. "I was worried that he didn't have enough experience in publishing, others were worried about the way he started immediately cleaning house. But I think he proved us all wrong pretty quickly."

Justin took another gulp from his glass and tried to formulate a positive, but not too enthusiastically positive, response. Against his will his eyes drifted over to the fireplace,

where JC was talking to several authors and a small group of marketing people. As he watched, JC raised his glass to his lips and slanted his eyes in Justin's direction. For a moment they stared at each other and Justin felt the back of his neck tingle as his pulse accelerated and the noisy room become muffled and far away. By the time JC looked away to laugh at someone's comment, Justin had completely lost his train of thought. He was almost trembling as he raised his glass to his mouth and emptied it, feeling his head spin gently.

Elise's husband had distracted her with some hors d'oeuvres on a small plate, and Justin's stomach reminded him forcefully that it needed food. Then two of the assistants squeezed by and stopped to greet them, and Justin was just about to slide away in search of something to eat when Elise stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Justin, I want to say -- I have some really high hopes for the press for the coming year, and I'm so pleased that you'll be here with us. I think you're a very fine editor," she said earnestly. "Honestly, I'm amazed at the way you pulled the music department together these last few months. You've brought so much to our list, and I'm really looking forward to working with you this year."

Justin felt his heart swell as her compliment. "Well, wow, thank you," he said, hoping that his face wasn't red. "And I'll be honest with you," he told her seriously. "It's such a pleasure to work with you, Elise. I feel I learn something valuable every single day, just watching the way you do things." He grinned as she blushed a little. "I'm looking forward to the new year as well," he finished.

Elise's smile grew and she cocked her head a little, looking like an inquisitive bird. "For a number of reasons, I'm sure," she said enigmatically, and Justin blinked at her.

"Well, I'm sure we're going to have another good season," he started earnestly. "I'm really excited about the spring list; it seems that we have so many . . ."

Elise suppressed a smile. "I'm not talking about the spring list, Justin," she said softly, "although I agree that it's going to be a very good one." Her eyes watched him closely, gentle and amused. "I'm talking about you, and how the new year will hopefully bring you some -- ah -- personal happiness, as well as professional success."

Justin stared at her, head spinning and alarm sparkling through his nerve endings as he scrambled to understand her meaning. "I'm not sure what you're saying," he said slowly.

Elise leaned closer and pitched her voice low. "I'm saying," she said quietly, "that I'm not blind, and when two people who can't approach each other because of their relative work situations exchange the sort of looks I believe I've seen you exchange with . . . Well," she said, and paused to raise her glass to her lips again while Justin waited in an agony of suspense. "Let me just say that I understand why you would be looking forward to the new year, and to having a new director at the helm."

And now Justin was blushing; he could feel the heat climbing into this cheeks. "I'm sure you're wrong," he stammered, and in desperation reached for another full glass of champagne from a passing waiter while Elise laughed fondly at him.

"Oh, I'm quite sure that I'm not," she said with amusement. "But you needn't worry," she whispered, leaning closer. "Your secret crush is safe with me."

Justin gulped hard and felt his head spin a little as he forced a shaky laugh. Secret crush, she'd said. She didn't know anything, no details; possibly she just thought Justin had a *crush* on JC, which was completely understandable and . . .

"Now," she said, lifting her glass gracefully toward the fireplace -- and JC -- as if the excruciating conversation they'd just had hadn't taken place, "Have you seen JC's book collection? I've never seen anything like it in a private residence; I'm almost afraid to look too closely for fear I'll get sucked in and miss the rest of this nice party."

"I can't wait to check it out. I'm going to do that just as soon as I get some food in my stomach," Justin assured her, and made his escape.

There were waiters circulating discreetly about and what appeared to be a buffet table was set up at the far end of the room by the big windows and their spectacular view. Justin set his empty -- empty! again! -- glass on a waiter's tray and headed for the table.

It was a long, slow journey. He hadn't traveled more than a few feet, exchanging pleasantries along the way, when Justin was stopped by a small group of the art interns, including Jennifer. They all turned from their examination of JC's Christmas tree to exchange holiday greetings with Justin for all the world as if they hadn't just seen him in a meeting the previous afternoon.

"Have you seen these ornaments?" Jennifer asked him excitedly as her boyfriend pushed yet another full champagne glass into Justin's hand. "They're handmade, authentic -- oh my god my folk art professor would have a cow if she could see these," she said enthusiastically.

"Yes, well, I guess JC has a hell of a decorator," Justin said and then winced as Jennifer raised her eyebrows at him. Did that sound critical? He hadn't mean it to sound critical; nobody could expect JC, with the sort of hours he worked, to be personally involved in the decoration of the rooms he used for entertaining, especially for holiday parties. Justin cast another look around the room, noting the festive details that he'd missed the first time around, the colorful little lights that illuminated the windows and what might have been dim areas of the room without them, the thick pine branches over the mantle of the fireplace that filled the room with a rich scent, the . . .

"No, Justin, seriously. Look at this one." Jennifer pointed to an ornament around the side of the tree, just above eye level. It was a small clay snowman, heavy enough to make the thick branch it hung on sag. Justin leaned closer, staring. Over the snowman's fat belly the word "Joshua" was painted in painstaking block letters. Jennifer reached up and turned the ornament carefully over, revealing the unpainted backside, where "Love, Heather '85" was carved into the clay. "I think these are really his, or have been passed down in his family," she said. "And a lot of them are really, really old." She laughed a little. "Who'd have thought a cold fish like our director would have such things on his Christmas tree?"

Justin stared at the ornament, seeing ones similar to it all over the tree, and felt a rush of emotions so sudden and strong they almost overwhelmed him. Jennifer and her boyfriend and

the other interns had no idea what the man who lived here was really like, he thought slowly. They knew the press's director, the focused and driven man who'd saved the press from almost certain death, who ran meetings and imposed deadlines and had made the business a success in one short year. But they didn't know the man whose sister would love him enough to carefully craft a whole series of Christmas tree ornaments for him when they were children. Nobody in this room, Justin thought as he stared at the tree, knew that JC. Nobody but him.

His thoughts deteriorated into confusion as he talked and laughed with the interns and their dates before resuming his slow progress toward the buffet table. The room seemed even more crowded than it had been an hour ago; everyone was laughing and cheerful and having a good time, and as he passed the stairs there was another group of people, mostly from the business office, just coming down. He heard them exclaiming over the beauty of the room, the tree, the incredible view, and felt an almost proprietary pride that embarrassed him. He didn't dare look around the room; god only knew what the sight of JC would do to his already spinning head right now. He really needed to get some food into his stomach before he humiliated himself in some way.

He found Lance near the window with a small plate of finger foods, talking contentedly with two of the accountants from the business department. "Where have you been?" Justin asked as they moved away in search of more alcohol. "I haven't seen you since we got here."

"Yeah, it's a big place," Lance said evasively. "Have you had any of this food? It's incredible."

Justin's stomach rumbled and Lance lifted an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, I know," he said, embarrassed. "I've been trying to do that since we got here. The food, I mean."

"Have you talked to your boss yet?" Lance asked innocently, and Justin narrowed his eyes at him.

"No, not yet," he said slowly, and Lance smiled pityingly at him.

"Losing your nerve?" he asked softly, and Justin flushed.

"No, I haven't," he responded. "It's just kind of a tough thing to do with all these people around, you know?"

"You didn't have any trouble a year and a half ago," Lance reminded him serenely, and Justin grit his teeth.

"Things are different now," he said shortly. "A year and a half ago I didn't know him; a year and a half ago I wasn't in lo . . ." he broke off and went silent, feeling his face heat up.

Lance smiled at him, his eyes concerned. "So it's like that, is it?" he asked, and patted Justin's arm when he closed his eyes and nodded. "Well, then. You're just going to have to find a way to talk to him. Turn on the Timberlake charm, let him know what he's missing out on."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Right," he said, and then sighed. "Actually, that's pretty much exactly what I'm going to do. Or try to do. If I could just have an honest conversation with him, try to figure out what -- if anything -- is going on in his mind."

"You can do it," Lance said encouragingly. "And based on my observations, I think it's a good time to give it a try. He seems to be in a fine mood tonight."

"You've talked to him?"

"Oh yes," Lance said blithely. "I have not lost my manners; I greeted my host and thanked him for the nice party." He sipped his champagne as Justin rolled his eyes again. "And he was very gracious and polite, even though he hates my guts and doesn't ever, ever want to see me walking into a room with you again."

"Jesus Christ," Justin hissed. "Will you keep your voice down? Oh my god." But his stomach flipped in excitement at Lance's words, and the hand holding his champagne glass trembled a little. "You're lying. He did not say that."

"Oh, nobody's listening to us," Lance scoffed, but he did lower his voice. "And no, he didn't actually say that. But he really didn't have to."

Justin couldn't help it; he turned and glanced over the crowded room, hoping for a glimpse of JC as Lance watched him with amusement.

"Did you know he and Chris were friends in college?"

"As a matter of fact," Justin replied quietly as he drained his glass, "I did know that." He glanced narrowly back at Lance. "Did he tell you that? Or have you been hanging out with Chris all night?"

Lance narrowed his eyes at him, then grinned. "Eat something before you talk to JC," he advised. "You look drunk already."

"I am not drunk already," Justin said crossly, but he handed Lance his empty glass and moved to the long table filled with a mouth-watering array of foods and grabbed a plate.

As Justin filled his plate with figs, walnuts, several of the many fancy, tiny sandwiches available, and an iced sugar cookie, he noticed that people were gathering at the other end of the room near JC, who was standing next to Elise Martin, his head inclined to her as they laughed at some sort of private joke. As people pressed nearer and nearer, all eyes on JC, he looked almost casually at the fireplace behind him, then stepped neatly up onto the hearth so he could look back at everyone. A silence fell on the room and JC lifted his head and began to talk.

"Thank you all for coming, and warmest wishes to all of you and your families this holiday season," he said, and gave everyone a beautiful and gracious smile. "I don't want to make a speech -- I figure that over the past year I've made just about all of you into my own captive audience at one time or another."

A few people laughed, and JC smiled back.

"But I do want to say a few things before I leave you all." JC looked down at the glass of champagne he held in his hand for a moment, seeming to collect his thoughts, and even though Justin knew him far, far too well to think he'd give a speech like this without preparing it beforehand, he was nonetheless deeply impressed with the elegance of his gestures, the lovely, unplanned way he seemed to move. The holiday lights strung in the room reflected in the depths of his eyes, and he was gorgeous, quite simply the most lovely man Justin had ever seen in his life.

"When I first came here, I know I was hard on you. I know I was tough, and I know a lot of you probably still can't stand me."

Here there was more laughter, and JC unselfconsciously joined in.

"Be that as it may, I still wanted to tell you how deeply impressed I am by all of you. We're on the tail end of an incredible season, and I fully expect the spring list to be just as successful -- and the reason for that is you. Your dedication, your intelligence, your hard work. And I just --" JC waved a hand a little uncomfortably as a few people began to clap, silencing them. "I just wanted to thank you all. It's been a great, great year for me -- I wouldn't have wanted to spend it anywhere else. Best of luck to all of you."

"To JC!" Chris yelled, lifting his glass, and Justin felt his face burn with pleasure as several other people immediately raised their glasses too and said, "JC!" as the entire room toasted him. JC lowered his head for just a moment, and when he raised it, he was flushed with embarrassment and pleasure, smiling and uncomfortable at once, his hand fidgeting a little with the hem of his jacket, his eyes sparkling and bright.

"Thank you -- thank you so much," he finally said. "And please believe me when I say that I want everything good for this press, everything good for all of you."

There was a brief pause then.

"To that end," JC continued, "I have a special announcement to make."

Here JC nodded graciously to Elise, then gently extended a hand to her as she stepped up on the hearth next to him.

"Elise!" someone yelled, and soon the entire room was full of applause. Elise was radiant and smiling, her eyes alight with pleasure, and as he stared at her, Justin felt a surge of affection for everyone and everything. He had the best job in the world at the best press in the world. The year and a half he had worked at Phoenix had been in many ways the best time of his life, and he was delighted to see that things were apparently going to continue moving smoothly for the press.

JC quieted the crowd, smiling broadly.

"Do I even have to announce this?" he said, laughing, and looked affectionately at Elise. "It's my distinct pleasure to offer to you the next director of Phoenix Press: Elise Martin."

More applause broke out, but quickly quieted as JC lifted his glass. "To Elise, for her strength, intelligence, and her wisdom. To Elise, who will be a strong, fair, smart leader. To Elise, the new director of Phoenix Press."

"Elise!" people yelled, and everyone drank heartily to her. Then, someone yelled "Speech!" Elise responded with incredulous laughter, looking as if she wanted to step back down and join the crowd again, but Justin noticed that JC lightly took hold of her arm and refused to let her; he bent over, murmured in her ear, and made her smile yet again. Then she beamed out at the crowd and was ready to speak.

"I know you all so well that it feels strange to be up here in front of you like this," she began, and Justin watched JC's mouth tighten a bit. Probably not the most politic thing for her to say, but Justin had faith in her, and so, he assumed, did JC. He wouldn't be so obviously worried for her if he didn't.

"But I'm delighted that I know you all, delighted that I'm not coming in from outside, because how else would I have come to such appreciation for your various talents and gifts? How else would I have come to have such incredible pride in this press? And how else would I have come to such an intimate and thorough understanding of all the very best gossip the publishing world has to offer?"

Waves of laughter seized the room, and Justin caught a distinct look of relief in JC's eyes.

"But truly -- we have so much good work to do," Elise said. "As JC just said, we're coming off a fabulous year, and I firmly believe things are only going to get better for us. With acquiring editors like Karen and Justin, manuscript editors like Derek, designers like Chris, and a production department led so capably and efficiently by Jerry, there's really no way we can't make great books -- and with our marketing team and business department to sell them, there's no way we can't make a hell of a lot of money while doing so. Really and truly, there are only good things ahead."

Everyone clapped again, and Elise smiled beautifully, serenely at them. She was going to be good, Justin thought as his blush of pleasure at being mentioned by her started to fade. She was really going to be good.

"Okay. I don't want to keep anyone away from the marvelous food and drink that have been provided for us tonight, but there is one final thing I'd like to say." Elise looked for a long moment at JC, and the entire room went silent.

"Thank you," she said quietly and firmly. "JC, thank you so much for everything you've done for us. I'm not going to lie -- I'm delighted to have this job --"

Here a few people clapped again, and yet again the radiant smile spread over Elise's face. Everyone was a little bit in love with her tonight, Justin thought. He certainly was.

"But none of this would have happened -- none of this could have happened without you. And on behalf of both Phoenix Press and myself, I want to remind you that you will always be welcome here."

Elise turned gracefully to the crowd, lifted her glass, and said, "One more time: to JC!"

After the second toast, JC and Elise shook hands, then embraced, and Justin grinned like a fool as the music started up again and the crowd began to disperse, his eyes locked steadily on JC, who, after talking to Elise for a moment longer, bent his head for a conversation with someone from business.

It didn't look like a conversation with any amount of staying power, and for a moment Justin contemplated making his way over to JC, stepping in, looking intently at him, and saying the things he'd been longing to say all night -- and probably for the past several weeks as well, if he were being honest with himself. Justin bit his lip and raised his eyebrows, waiting, and sure enough, the business person moved away, leaving JC alone for just a second. As Justin watched him slowly lift his head and scan the room briefly, he felt his chest tighten. What was JC looking for? Who did JC want to see tonight?

It was then that JC's eyes found his, pausing speculatively and almost questioningly, and Justin nearly gasped as he realized the look for what it was: JC was apparently trying to feel him out, trying to get a sense of what was on his mind. Without really thinking about it, Justin let himself show some of the admiration and the longing that he felt, and he let himself do that for far beyond the dictates of politeness or even decency. And as he did so, JC let a slow, lazy grin spread over his face, looked back at Justin with what could only be, Justin hoped, classified as an invitation of sorts. Then JC began to make his way across the room toward him, and everything else in the world besides JC's dark eyes disappeared, and Justin stood very, very still and nearly shivered in delicious anticipation. Was he really coming over to -- was this going to be --

When he felt a hand on his arm Justin froze, then turned around to meet a smiling Thomas Kearney.

"Justin, good evening! What a wonderful night for this press -- it's truly wonderful to share in such good will," Kearney said, gesturing broadly at the room. "Thank you very much for inviting me."

Justin let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and forced himself to smile and nod. He was dying to look back, dying to check to see if JC were still headed toward him, but that was impossible now. And he really did want to talk to Thomas Kearney, who was important to him even though his timing was surely the worst in the world. After all, this was a work party, Justin reminded himself.

It was just that JC's expression had been so electrifyingly familiar, so painfully rousing. Justin hadn't seen JC look at him with that particular combination of desire and intent since -- well, in a long time, and --

Okay, this had to stop.

"Tom, it's great to see you," Justin said, smiling back, then laughed in surprise as Kearney pulled him into a rough, friendly hug. "Congratulations again on the Harper's review."

"Thank you, thank you. You've been really so good to me, Justin -- each time I think of it, it makes me even gladder that I decided to give my book to you instead of those bastards over at Fitzgerald Random."

Justin remembered the severe panic he'd experienced when he thought he'd lost the book, and smiled warmly at him. "You'll never know, Tom, exactly how glad I am. It was an honor to work with you, and it's been so wonderful to see you getting the success you deserve."

"Yes, well, a good part of my success came from you, I hope you know. The feedback and the encouragement you gave me made all the difference in the world. You helped me see my book in an entirely new light, helped me make it better, and I'm always going to be grateful to you for that."

Pleasure spread like wildfire through Justin. "I -- thank you so much, Tom. I -- really, I don’t even know what to say."

"You'd better start getting used to hearing compliments, Justin," a low, amused voice said from behind Justin, and as Justin slowly turned around to meet JC's glittering blue eyes, his knees came close to wobbling. "Because I have a feeling you'll be getting a lot more of them in the future."

"Yes, absolutely," Kearney agreed, either not noticing or not acknowledging the fact that Justin and JC were staring in each other's eyes instead of looking at him. "I couldn't be more pleased with Justin, or with Phoenix Press."

Only then did JC break the exhilarating eye contact, only then did he turn smoothly, smile at Kearney, and say, "Thank you, Tom. I'm so glad you're here tonight. I wouldn't want to have left without talking to you one more time."

"What will you be doing?" Kearney asked. "I can't believe this is true -- but I heard some sort of rumor about you being some sort of a tycoon or something."

JC smiled very carefully. "I'll be working for the Antaeus corporation doing mergers and acquisitions."

"So it is -- so you are --" Kearney gave JC a vaguely alarmed look -- it was more than a little disapproving, and as he felt JC tense subtly, Justin quickly stepped in.

"Antaeus actually owns Phoenix Press," he told Kearney. "Phoenix Press wouldn't even be standing if it weren't for them."

"Is that so?" Kearney looked cautiously at JC. "Well, all right. Go off and be a heartless corporate raider, then -- as long as you keep this press running."

JC laughed. "Believe me, this press is very important to me. The year I've worked here has been . . . incredibly enjoyable," he said, and then looked Justin right in the eye again. "But Tom, I've been meaning to ask you -- any plans for a second book? Anything you're working on?"

Kearney laughed. "Your friend Justin here has already been delicately sounding me out about that in our latest exchange of e-mails."

"Yes, well, I told you he was good -- I've known that since the beginning," JC said silkily, and with more than a hint of innuendo, and Justin very nearly choked on the champagne he was drinking.

Kearney apparently didn't hear the undertones in that, because he merely laughed again, and then reached out to shake JC's hand.

"So good to talk to you, so good to see you again. All best to you in the future."

"You too, Tom." JC gave him a genuine smile then, all games gone, and as Kearney bid goodbye to Justin and then left them both, Justin was left to reflect once more on just how damn good JC was at publishing.

"You could've been a great acquiring editor," he said, not bothering to hide a certain amount of wistfulness. "Your instincts are so, so good."

JC smiled politely, but his eyes were darkening, deepening in color as the considerable force of his interest began to focus on Justin, and Justin dragged in a deep breath and tightly gripped his champagne glass, fighting for control, fighting to remain civil and collected. Now was the time -- now was so definitely the time to move in, particularly with the look on JC's face -- but now that he had the opportunity to speak frankly to JC about what mattered to him most, Justin was seized with indecision and hesitation.

Looking almost helplessly at JC, he opened his mouth and tried to make something intelligent come out. Nothing did.

"Are you having a good time, Justin?" JC asked, his voice low and soft.

"Oh, yes," Justin said distractedly, and JC lifted an eyebrow, showing Justin his long throat as he raised his glass to his lips. Say something he commanded himself frantically as he watched JC swallow. Do it, now. Do it.

"I'm so glad to hear that," JC replied. He hesitated for a long, suspenseful moment, his eyes seeming to search Justin's. Then he gifted Justin with a perfect and devastating smile even as he seemed to withdraw. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I really should see to the rest of my guests."

Oh no, Justin thought in dismay as JC nodded politely at him, his eyes lingering as he turned away. No, he was not just walking away from Justin like that; he couldn't possibly do that, not after the things he'd just said in front of Thomas Kearney, not after the way he'd just looked at him.

But he was. JC took about three steps and was immediately collared by one of the press's more eminent authors, pulled into a boisterous conversation where everyone seemed to be talking loudly and laughing, and as Justin blinked in dismay JC threw his head back and laughed at something the author's wife said to him.

Justin turned away, utterly furious with himself. A perfect opportunity, a moment alone in this crowded room with JC, a chance to speak plainly, and he'd blown it. Totally choked.

He drained his glass and then looked at it with dawning fury. If he was going to accomplish his goal this evening, it was time to switch to water. Jaw set, he turned toward the bar at the opposite end of the room.

And he would accomplish his goal, he told himself firmly as he moved slowly through the crowd. He would sober up a bit, eat a little more, and watch for his opportunity to get JC in a private moment of conversation. And then he'd say -- well, something. Something perfect, something light and perfect and confident that would tell JC how he felt, what he wanted. Something that would invite JC to tell him what he felt and what he wanted. If Justin was lucky, if he was very, very lucky and if he hadn't just completely misread JC's words and tone and body language . . .

At that thought Justin stopped dead in the middle of the room, cold dread forcing the tipsiness from his head. JC was an unconscious flirt. He did and said things that made Justin's head spin without even being aware of it half the time -- what if the encounter they'd just had had been more of the same? Perhaps he wasn't flirting with Justin at all; perhaps he was just, well, being who he was. Perhaps he really, truly had no further interest in Justin.

Dear god, this year had really done a number on his confidence level, Justin thought as he resumed his slow progress across the room. Desperately he groped for the mental laundry list of provocative glances, warm smiles, and deliberate eye contact that he'd catalogued over the past month and clutched it hopefully to himself. He couldn't be imagining them all; he couldn't possibly be deluding himself completely. Could he?

He paused to greet more colleagues and risked a glance behind him. JC was standing with another loud group of people, his back to the huge window looking out over Central Park, his eyes sweeping the room even as he talked and laughed. Justin gulped hard. Maybe he was deluding himself, he thought, and maybe he wasn't. But there was only one way to find out.

"Are you talking to yourself?" asked a disbelieving voice in his ear, and Justin turned with a sigh to face Nick Carter.

"Carter," he said without enthusiasm, and they bared their teeth at each other in what could pass for polite smiles. "Happy holidays."

"Yeah, same to you," Nick said, reluctantly holding his hand out for Justin to shake. "And congratulations on a great year," he added, somewhat grudgingly.

"Thanks," Justin said. "You had a good one too."

Nick released his hand and stepped back a little, shifting uncomfortably. "Yeah, well, I think next year will be even better," he said a shade defensively, and Justin smiled triumphantly at him. "So, are you? Talking to yourself?"

Justin blinked and flushed a little. "Of course not," he said stiffly. "What an asinine thing to say."

"Well, I saw you talking to the head guy," Nick said, jerking his head in JC's direction. "I don't know what he said to you, but you looked sort of poleaxed." His eyes narrowed on Justin's face and he started to grin.

"So what happened?" Nick asked, lowering his voice and bending closer. "Did you hit on him? Did he turn you down?"

"What the f . . . no, of course I didn't hit on him," Justin said, outraged.

"Oh come on," Nick said with disgust. "You can tell me. I know you've noticed him. I think everyone in the press has noticed him," he said with another sideways look at JC that made Justin's blood boil.

"I find this conversation incredibly inappropriate," Justin said with dignity. "He's our boss, Nick."

Nick grinned, an evil, salacious thing that made Justin blink in indignation. "Not for much longer," he said meaningfully. "C'mon, Justin, don't be such a prude. Tell me what he said to you to make you look like you'd just been hit over the head with a two-by-four." He narrowed his eyes on Justin's face. "Or is this just the way you always look when you're drunk?"

"I am not drunk," Justin hissed impatiently, and Nick laughed at him.

"Okay, okay," he said, and to Justin's surprise he held his hand out again for Justin to shake. "I'm going to be taking off pretty soon," Nick said, smiling for real this time. "I didn't mean to push your buttons, I really just wanted to wish you a good holiday, man."

Justin relaxed a bit, shaking Nick's hand. "Same to you, Nick," he said. "See you next year."

"You know it," Nick said confidently, and with another exchange of mock glares they parted ways.

After far too much socializing, Justin made it to the bar and got the biggest glass of cold water that the bartenders could find. He gulped one down and got a refill before looking around for a quiet corner where he could regroup. Lance was nowhere to be seen and Justin was just about talked out. Taking care to avoid eye contact with his increasingly boisterous co-workers, he headed determinedly over to the fireplace and the book collection he'd been dying to see the entire evening. He kept his back to the room and sipped his cold water steadily, his eyes wide on the bookshelves.

Oh, there were so many wonderful things here, Justin thought, his hands aching to reach out and touch. Antique books in cloth and leather bindings, carefully preserved. First editions of so many classics, the lettering on the bindings gilded and stamped. Old, rare, valuable books, and out here on open shelves where they could be enjoyed and appreciated, rather than hidden away behind glass or plastic. Many of them were finely preserved special editions from Justin's own press, and he felt a surge of pride at being part of such a venerable institution.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

Justin gulped. He turned his eyes away slowly from the books and looked at JC, who'd come to stand silently beside him. JC's eyes were also on the books, his soft mouth curved into a small smile. Just looking at him made Justin's heart hurt.

"They are so, so beautiful," Justin said reverently. "It's a huge effort not to touch -- I want to look at each and every one of them."

JC smiled and glanced quickly at Justin, a lightning-fast glimpse of blue. "Some of them are really old, and probably shouldn't be touched," he admitted quietly. "They're my grandmother's collection. But I couldn't bear to seal them up. She always thought books should be enjoyed."

"She was right," Justin said quietly. "And they look really beautiful here in this room." His pulse was pounding with excitement and hope. This was exactly where he wanted to be, and how he'd hoped to engineer this conversation. They were as private as they could be in the crowded, noisy room, and nobody else was close enough to eavesdrop. He needed to make his move, now.

"Yeah," JC said mildly. "I've made a bunch of changes to the place. What do you think of it?" His eyes flickered back to Justin and away before Justin could read their expression.

"Seriously, JC," Justin said, turning toward him and taking his courage in both hands. "I can't believe the difference in this room. It doesn't even look like the same place."

"Yes, well," JC replied with a little smile that Justin couldn't read. "Someone once told me that the previous decoration scheme was a bit -- sterile."

Justin felt himself blush and struggled to keep his composure, aware of JC's eyes resting steadily on him as he turned from the bookcase to face him.

"Well, it's really beautiful now," he said quietly, and shifted his water glass from one sweating hand to the other. "Are you, um, happy with the change?"

"I am," JC said straightforwardly. "All of it, not just this room." There was a small pause as they stared at each other, and Justin felt his heart rate gradually accelerate. "I could show you, if you're interested," JC said more quietly, pitching his voice for Justin's ears alone. "It's the least I can do after you put me up this summer while the renovations were taking place."

Justin breathed very carefully in and out, his eyes unblinking on JC's face. "Are you asking me . . ." he paused and gulped. "Are you offering me a tour?" he asked.

JC's eyes were very clear and very direct on his. "Well, if you're -- interested," he replied just as quietly, and then he breathed in quickly and said "No, wait. Let me be more clear." He took a sip from his champagne glass and hesitated while Justin trembled with tension. "What I'm doing is inviting you to stay."

"Stay," Justin breathed, feeling his body flush with heat as his heart started to gallop.

"If you're interested," JC repeated. His expression was mild, polite, but his mouth was a little tense, and his eyes burned into Justin's.

With an effort Justin pulled himself together. "Yes. Yes I would like that very much," he said quietly, fervently, feeling joy slowly bloom through him as the shock of JC's direct proposition sunk in.

JC smiled slowly at him. "I'm very glad to hear that," he said simply. For a moment they simply stared silently at each other, and then JC glanced around them at the crowd and sighed. "People should be starting to leave soon," he said. "I hope," he added, and Justin laughed shakily, still breathless with delight, with joy.

"It's your own fault for throwing such a great party," he said, and JC turned to him, his eyes intent.

"You'll wait?" he asked, and Justin nodded, unable to wipe the smile from his face, unable to hide his pleasure, his relief, his happiness.

"I'll wait," he promised. "And if you stop serving the alcohol, maybe they'll leave sooner."

"Good idea," JC said with a warm, private smile just for Justin. "I'll see what I can do about that."

Justin glanced around the room. "Do you want me to wait somewhere when people start to leave?" he asked. "I could go hide in the restroom again."

JC moved a little closer. "You can do whatever makes you feel most comfortable," he said, his voice low and rough enough to make Justin's skin tingle. "You can go upstairs and wait for me, if you want. You can stand on the steps beside me and say goodnight to everyone here as they leave if you want." He sipped again from his glass, his eyes dark and hot on Justin's face. "I want you to do whatever makes you most comfortable," he added quietly.

"Oh," Justin breathed. "I will, I, okay."

JC smiled at him again, and turned away to weave through the crowd, leaving Justin all but gasping. Justin watched him move purposefully toward the bar, admiring his lean form as he moved away, and then he backed up to look over the whole room. He knew he was smiling foolishly, but as he caught Elise's eye and saw her give him a grin and subtle thumbs-up, he just didn't care.

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He was still standing by the fireplace, grinning like an idiot into his water glass as he replayed his conversation with JC over and over in his head, when Lance moved quietly up beside him.

"Hey," he greeted Justin quietly, and Justin lifted his head and beamed at him. Lance blinked and raised an eyebrow. "How are you doing?" he asked cautiously.

"I'm doing just great," Justin said happily. "Just, well, great. How about you?"

"Yeah," Lance said slowly. "This has been a really nice party."

"The best," Justin said fervently. He struggled to keep from searching the room for JC, preferring to keep his excitement to himself for the moment.

"Well, look at you," Lance said with a laugh. "All lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. I'm guessing this means you had some sort of, uh, satisfactory conversation with your boss?"

Justin nodded happily, feeling the grin split his face. "But he's really not my boss anymore," he corrected him cheerfully. "Finally, god, finally he's not my boss."

"Well, then. What is he?" Lance asked mildly, and Justin's grin dimmed a little.

"Well, we could hardly discuss such a thing here," he said. "But he's not my boss. And I'm actually, um, going to stay for a bit, if you don't mind getting yourself home."

"You know, that's no problem whatsoever," Lance said, suspiciously agreeable. "The bartenders are packing up and I think it's about that time." He smiled at Justin again. "You know, it's like coming full circle," Lance added. "A year and a half later, and here you and I are in front of this same fireplace, having this same conversation."

He and Justin both glanced at the fireplace. "Well," Lance added wryly. "Sort of the same fireplace. Sort of the same conversation." He grinned at Justin. "Anyway."

"Anyway," Justin echoed agreeably. "If you're feeling nostalgic, you could give me a lecture about the evils of fraternizing with big, bad business tycoons."

"I remember the lecture being more about not embarrassing me in front of my co-workers," Lance said dryly. "I really don't care what you do in front of your own."

Justin laughed, feeling happiness bubble through him. "Well, thanks for that, anyway," he said, grinning. "It's great to know you have my best interests at heart."

"That's what friends are for." Lance sounded far too pleased with himself. "I will leave you here in the hands of . . . well, strike that. To be truthful, I came looking for you to tell you that I was taking off, and to wish you luck with your big, bad tycoon." He smiled enigmatically at Justin. "I've found my own way home."

Justin looked at him curiously. "You're catching a ride with someone?" he asked, and Lance nodded, seemingly disinterested.

Justin raised his eyebrows. "Do I need to ask who?" he asked carefully, and his eyes widened at Lance's grin.

"Call me before you head to Memphis," Lance said evasively, and started to back away.

"Oh no you don't," Justin said fiercely. "You get back here and tell me who you're going home with." But Lance gave him a final grin and a casual wave over his shoulder as he disappeared back into the crowd.

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As the guests began to disperse, Justin walked deeper into the apartment and into JC's study, widening his eyes in pleasant surprise as he looked around. The entire space felt spacious and golden, from the warmth of the parquet floors to the gleaming cream-colored wood of the bookshelves that had been built into the wall. There were kilim rugs on the floors and burnished tan leather chairs facing each other, each with their own special reading light. Across the room was a magnificent old desk with a gleaming surface, most certainly an antique and probably something the Chasez family had been polishing and working at for years. Recessed lights in the ceiling made the room seem to glow, and Justin liked the effect. It was an expensively, tastefully done room to be sure, but it felt comfortable, not ostentatious or foreboding. It felt like a place where someone might actually read.

And someone apparently did read here, Justin thought as he walked to a couch in the middle of the room and caught sight of a stack of books on the coffee table in front of it. He was very, very tempted to pick up the books and see what JC had been treating himself to -- or what he wanted his guests to think he'd been reading -- but a noise from outside the room interrupted his reverie, and he looked anxiously at the door.

Oh god. God. He and JC were going to -- finally, the two of them would . . .

Justin could not stop the smile that came to his face as he thought about JC, as he remembered the kindness in his eyes, the warmth of his smile, the gentle, sure, unassuming way he used to touch him. He thought about the conversations they had, the way they'd learned to communicate in a sort of shorthand, the way they'd sometimes gotten ridiculous and laughed until tears streamed out of their eyes. And then he thought about JC in bed, thought about the hungry, intense look in his eyes, his slow, smooth, sure movements. He'd come to know Justin's body intimately, to understand exactly how to make him strain and moan in pleasure, and Justin had done the same with him. This was an area in which they'd both been deeply motivated, and it had paid off.

His relationship with JC, sex with JC -- it had been almost frighteningly perfect, and now, they were going to try again. Now, they were going to see if they could pick up the pieces. Justin wasn't fool enough to think that everything would automatically be effortless, but he couldn't help but admit to himself how much he longed for this, how hopeful about it, how very, very grateful he was that JC had come back to him.

But was it really going to happen? Justin frowned and idly ran a hand across the spines of JC's books as he slowly walked the edge of the room. Could he be absolutely sure that he'd heard JC correctly? He had mistaken JC's intentions before, and he'd had more than a little to drink tonight. What if JC came into the room and gently but firmly let him down? What if the invitation he'd thought he'd received had been an affirmation of a friendship but no more? What if JC were out there trying to think of a civil way to let Justin down? Justin rubbed his eyes unhappily. That would be devastating. Quickly and almost frantically, he shoved all relationship thoughts out of his mind. Better not to think about it -- better to process what happened as it presented itself to him.

As he moved closer to JC's desk, Justin noticed that not all of the bookshelves were full of books: some of them featured family photographs and other knickknacks. Justin peered

carefully at some of the photographs and caught a glimpse of an extremely thin, extremely young-looking JC standing next to what had to be his grandparents. All the faces in the picture were pleasant, but Justin had to smile as he finally saw the grandmother JC had been so devoted to, took in the kindness of her eyes and the warmth of her expression. From the little he'd told Justin about his youth, it seemed that JC hadn't always had gentle people around him, which made Justin all the more glad that his grandmother had been so good to him.

It was getting stuffy in the room, so Justin shrugged out of his suit coat then neatly draped it over the back of the couch, then unbuttoned his shirt at the wrists and rolled up the sleeves. Finally, he sighed in pleasure and loosened the knot of his tie, opening his shirt at the neck. For a moment he paused -- was it too presumptuous to relax in this fashion? Did he now look as if he were expecting something?

"Jesus," Justin said out loud, sick of himself and his worrying, then headed back to the bookshelves. Next to the desk were the books JC probably read most, Justin figured, and he picked a book from the shelves right behind it, a very nice copy of the essays of Montaigne. That seemed exactly the kind of book that JC would like, and as Justin opened the cover and caught a very much younger version of JC's signature, Justin grinned.

As he flipped through the pages, he couldn't help but murmur a little in pleasure, because the young Joshua Chasez had annotated the book, had starred certain passages and underlined others; had sometimes written "yes" and sometimes simply left a question mark in the margins. Justin longed to know how old JC had been when he'd done this, longed to know whether the adult version of him would find the same passages meaningful. Justin flipped back to the table of contents, located an essay titled "Against do-nothingness," next to which JC had put a red star, and then laughed out loud and flipped to it, beginning to read.

It wasn't exactly easy going, this essay, and Justin frowned and concentrated, bracing one hand against the bookshelf in front of him. He was so involved in the book that he didn't even notice that JC had come into the room until he heard his footsteps on the parquet floor. His heart beating hard in his chest, Justin quickly put the book back and closed his eyes for just a second to collect himself. He'd wanted to look calm and self-assured when JC came in -- so much for that.

JC still wore his jacket, but the tie was gone and like Justin, he'd unbuttoned his shirt at the throat. His hair was curling wildly around his face, and he was very slightly flushed. He looked straight at Justin for a moment, gave him a small smile, and then paused just inside the door, and closed it behind him. Justin felt a small thrill of excitement: JC wouldn't close the door if he were just going to throw him out, now would he?

"Hey," JC quietly said, and Justin nodded mutely, the tension in him rising to almost unbearable levels as he realized that JC was waiting for him to start a conversation, was looking to him to set the tone. For the hundredth time that night Justin went through and discarded all of the invitations and come-on lines he'd ever learned. Oh god. Why had words abandoned him on tonight of all nights?

"Everyone's gone?" he finally asked -- a lackluster attempt to be sure, but it least it got a response: JC nodded in return.

"It went well, I thought." JC's voice was mild, but his eyes were dark. He was standing very, very still, but he seemed to be full of energy -- Justin couldn't quite define it, but it interested him greatly. JC was fidgeting a little, and Justin shivered in sympathy. If JC had resorted to fidgeting, then he was most definitely struggling for control.

"Yeah. It was a really nice party." Justin tried to keep his voice even and steady, but it was hard.

"I --" JC took a step or two closer to Justin, then stopped. "It was nice to see Elise do so well."

"She really did. I think she's going to be great for the press."

"Mm," JC agreed, and then sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Tired?" Justin asked, and wanted to kill himself, because that was absolutely the wrong question.

"What? No!" JC looked carefully at Justin and then cautiously asked, "Are you?"

"No, no. I --"

JC' looked steadily at him, his expression thoughtful, and Justin suddenly found it difficult to breathe. After all this time, he was alone with JC again. After all this time, they would --

"Justin. Come here," JC softly said, and Justin dragged in a deep breath and felt his legs wobble as he slowly crossed the floor, as he moved toward the thing he'd been wanting for longer than he could remember.

When he was very close, JC opened his arms, then dragged Justin into a deep hug.

"Missed you so much," he murmured, and Justin swallowed hard and nodded, breathing in JC's scent and then sighing in pleasure as his arms tightened around him.

When JC moved back, he looked intently at Justin.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice shaking a little.

"I've been ready for months now," Justin told him, and then moved in close and kissed him, shivering in delight as JC's arms immediately tightened around him, as he made a soft, satisfied sound in the back of his throat. They kissed slowly and deliberately at first, their mouths almost cautious as they got reacquainted. JC moaned against Justin's lips, one hand sliding lazily to the back of his neck, the other placed firmly on his hip, and when Justin opened his mouth for him, JC pressed closer still. As the kiss deepened, so did the connection and the hunger between them. Justin was almost frantic -- it seemed that no matter how long they kissed or how much they touched each other, he'd never have enough of JC; he'd never get close enough to him. There was nothing he could do to control the intensity of his need.

"Oh god," JC said roughly, lifting his head, and when Justin looked into his eyes, he had to smile as he recognized the need in JC as well.

"There's nothing fast enough -- we can't --" JC said in frustration, and then leaned in again and kissed Justin on the side of the neck, gently sinking teeth into him and sliding his hands down and over Justin's ass, dragging him closer. Justin moaned in delight as their bodies met, pressing forward eagerly and sighing as JC kissed his neck, then shuddering a little as he realized that he was already painfully hard. It was not going to be long before he lost it, and suddenly a series of questions about what exactly was going on here filled Justin's mind.

But it was so hard to talk, especially now that he'd slid his hands under JC's jacket and begun untucking his shirt, his fingers close to aching with the need to touch JC's warm, bare skin. When he finally did it, felt the smooth, hot expanse of JC's back, Justin moaned almost helplessly as JC shuddered under his touch and pressed into him, urgently whispering his name.

Justin traced the long, lovely line of JC's spine, then dug fingers into his shoulder blades, rubbing roughly and firmly the way he remembered JC liking it. When JC sighed into his neck, Justin smiled -- he did remember; he did know JC.

And he wanted to touch a heck of a lot more of him, so Justin moved hands to his waist and then slowly began traveling up the front of his shirt, eagerly fitting fingers into the grooves of JC's ribcage, then pressing lightly but firmly into his abdomen. JC was breathing quickly and shallowly, and for a moment, Justin left his hands there, taking great pleasure in the fact that JC was as excited as he was. JC felt thinner, maybe, or was he simply even more tightly wound up? It was hard to tell.

"Move," JC breathed insistently, and Justin chuckled. He hadn't thought he'd miss JC's bossiness, his impatience, but in this context, it was wonderful to encounter them. He began to work his hands higher under JC's shirt, and then stopped dead in his tracks and breathed in deeply as his vision grew fuzzy at the edges. JC had just neatly worked his thigh in between his legs, was pressing it exactly where Justin needed it, and for a moment, Justin wasn't quite so certain he could remain standing.

"We should," he gasped as JC began unbuttoning his shirt, his fingers nimble and sure. "We should move -- I --"

JC looked into his eyes and nodded briefly, then began slowly easing Justin backward. Justin looked uncertainly behind him, then widened his eyes as he saw that JC was heading them toward the broad, smooth surface of his desk.

"Are you sure that's where --" he began to say, his voice rough with excitement, and JC nodded yet again, his eyes full of purpose. A moment later, Justin felt the edge of the desk digging into his thighs.

JC gently pressed him back and Justin took a seat on the edge of it, gasping in delight as JC spread his legs and stepped in between them, his hands moving easily to the waist of Justin's pants.

"JC, wait," Justin murmured, then moaned in shameless need as JC slid a hand over the front of the material to cup him.

"What?" JC was impatient at best when he was interrupted.

Justin took several heavy breaths, then put a hand on JC's wrist, silently begging him to stop for a moment.

JC widened his eyes a little bit as he took his hand away, then looked almost uncertainly at Justin before speaking in a slow, careful voice.

"You changed your mind?"

"No! No, no. Not that at all," Justin said, laughing nervously.

"Okay, okay." JC put a hand to his mouth and tilted his head for a moment, sighing in what Justin hoped was relief, and then leaned forward and gestured almost frantically at Justin. "Then why --"

"Because I want to know -- not a big talk or anything -- just -- I want to know what this is, what we're doing here."

JC looked even more surprised now. "Isn't it obvious? Surely you know. Surely you --"

"Maybe I just want to hear, it okay?"

"You want to hear it? Fine. I'll -- okay." JC took a few deep breaths, then looked right into Justin's eyes. "So this is us. This is us again. That's what I want, and I think it's what you want, and I'm hoping, Justin, that we don't have to talk much more about this right now, all right?"

Justin couldn't help but grin broadly at him. "So it's not -- not a one-night thing, not a special occasion."

"Of course not," JC snapped, and then took another deep breath and calmed down a little, spoke quietly and intently. "Justin, this is it, this is real. This is everything, okay?"

"I -- yeah. Yeah. I --" It was hard to speak in the midst of such joy, and Justin finally floundered into silence.

JC studied him for a moment before speaking again. "Do you really think that after all the work I went through to get us to this point I'd come back for just a single night?"

Justin very nearly laughed at the aggrieved sound in his voice. "Hey -- you're not the only one who worked. You're not -- you have no idea how hard I -- how much I --"

"Okay, yes. I know." JC looked contritely at him, then held up a hand and went on. "But what I want for us right now -- I just -- I want it to be permanent, okay? I want us to be together."

"I--" Justin felt himself blushing in pleasure.

JC looked steadily at him, then leaned in and sweetly whispered, "So we're clear, yes?"

"Yes. Very," Justin said, and smiled again.

"Good then." For a long moment, JC simply looked into Justin's eyes; then he leaned forward and kissed him deliberately and carefully. It was almost frighteningly intimate, and Justin felt himself beginning to shake as he opened his mouth for JC and sealed things between them.

When JC moved back, Justin smiled wickedly at him, then grabbed JC's hand and brought it back to his groin.

"Finally," JC said, smiling a little to show Justin that he didn't really mean it, and then possessively spread his fingers and caressed him. Justin swore as the desire came crashing back down on him, the weight of it so heavy he could hardly breathe or think.

"Okay. Okay. It has to be kind of fast now," he said, his voice thin and needy. "Because I can't, JC -- can't wait --"

"Shh," JC said, and then his hands were at Justin's waist, neatly undoing his pants, then urging him to drag them and his underwear down. As Justin did that, JC opened his pants as well, then reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a condom and lubricant, setting them on the desk beside Justin.

"Pretty fucking cocky of you," Justin gasped, and JC grinned and nodded at him, then bent down for a kiss. As JC slid fingers around Justin's cock and moved slowly from base to tip, his thumb sliding intimately over the head at the end of each upstroke, Justin moaned deep and low and rested his head on JC's shoulder.

"Yes," JC said fiercely as Justin grabbed his hips, then moved hands back further to cup his ass, and for a while it was like that, Justin gripping JC and pulling him closer while JC stroked him in the same deliberate, maddening fashion.

"More," Justin finally choked out, and JC stopped his hand on Justin's cock and listened to Justin's voice grow high and tremble as his thumb moved cleverly and slowly over the wet tip. Justin was panting now, eyes locked beseechingly on JC's.

"Definitely more," JC whispered, and then slowly moved his hands to Justin's hips and stepped close enough so that their cocks bumped each other.

"Would you like to bend over the desk for me?" JC asked very quietly, and Justin drew in a long, deep breath and nodded. JC kissed him deeply, his mouth hot and hungry, and then gently began to encourage him into the position he wanted.

"Oh god!" Justin groaned as he bent over the side of the desk, felt the cool, smooth surface of the wood pressing into the side of his face, into the heated skin of his chest. Then he felt JC's hands on his inner thighs, encouraging him to spread even wider, and Justin shuddered and did it, opened as wide as he could for JC, left himself open for him. When JC pressed slick, eager fingers into him, they both moaned, and Justin squeezed his eyes tight shut as the sensation became nearly overwhelming. Finally, JC roughly said, "Okay, now -- I'm going to -- oh, Justin," and then there was the exquisite, sharp pleasure of being filled, of letting JC inside and of feeling himself slowly start to welcome him. JC slid forward carefully, pausing

to let Justin accommodate him from time to time but never entirely stopping, not until he had sunk as deeply inside him as he could get.

"Fuck," JC said hoarsely, and leaned forward to rest against Justin's back, seating himself even more deeply. "Justin, fuck. I wanted this -- you -- so much."

"Move, move, move," Justin urged, his voice shaking, and then gripped either side of the desk, lifted his ass a bit and very nearly whimpered as JC began to ease himself in and out, still moving carefully for a while until they were both comfortable and relaxed.

"Now?" JC murmured, and Justin nodded frantically against the desk, then moaned like a fool as JC began to thrust more quickly, his breath hitching and catching each time he surged forward, his hands grabbing the edge of the desk a ways behind Justin's. Finally JC sank deep inside, then surged forward again and again, quick, urgent rocking, and Justin lifted up a little and smiled in bliss as he felt JC start to lose it, heard his voice stretch thin and felt his entire body shake with the force of it as he came.

"Justin," JC said, and collapsed onto his back again, the heat of his breath warming Justin's skin through his shirt. Justin breathed slowly and deeply, fighting his own intense need to come as he waited for JC to recover. Finally, JC slowly eased out of him, keeping Justin close as he turned to face him. Justin watched him with a needy, heavy-lidded stare.

"Mm," JC said. "You look so -- you're so --" and then his hands tightened on Justin’s naked hips, urging him to sit on the edge of the desk and then pushing him to lie down as he braced his arms on either side of Justin’s body and leaned down to take him into his mouth. Justin stared at the high ceiling and whimpered as the heat and tightness of JC's mouth surrounded him, then cried out in an even more desperate voice as JC slid two fingers inside him and moved with deadly accuracy to the exact right place and began to move. This was the advantage of having someone who knew your body so well, Justin thought wildly, and then closed his eyes, lifted his hips, and came for what seemed like forever. It was probably the shortest blow job in history, he thought with some embarrassment as JC murmured endearments and gently kissed his sensitive stomach, the tops of his thighs, and then licked a slow, satisfied line up his abdomen. It was also probably the best.

~ ~ ~ ~

It was very, very late. Outside the temperature had plummeted and snow was falling steadily but JC felt relaxed and luxuriously warm. His body ached in a number of delicious ways; even the slightly strained muscle on the back of his left thigh felt oddly good. And since that minor injury had been incurred in the very worthy endeavor of wrapping his legs around Justin while Justin had fucked him on the stairs, straining and panting and whispering gorgeous, filthy things into his ear, JC considered it well worthwhile.

Naked, hair-roughened legs tangled lazily with his and JC's skin tingled, goose bumps rising on his arms despite the soothing heat of the water, all from Justin's toes sliding slowly, suggestively down JC’s calf and against the arch of his foot. He smiled slowly, feeling happiness surge through him as he finally opened his eyes.

Justin faced him across the huge tub, submerged up to his shoulders and looking relaxed, sleepy and utterly pleased with himself. His face was flushed from the hot water, his mouth slack and his blue eyes at half-mast. And no wonder, JC thought as he watched Justin tilt his head and smile sweetly at him. It must be so late, probably past four in the morning, and the last few hours had been -- well, vigorous.

"How's your leg?" Justin inquired slyly, and JC grinned at him.

"Oh, now you're concerned for my welfare," he mocked, moving his feet to trap one of Justin's between them. "I don't recall you worrying about possible injuries when you tackled me on the stairs."

Justin had the grace to blush but his grin was huge and brilliant. "You can't blame me for that. I kind of couldn't help myself," he said cheerfully. "You were naked. And it had been too long."

JC raised an eyebrow and tried to look incredulous. "Too long? It had been, what, forty-five minutes since the couch in front of the fire? Two hours since the top of my desk?" He shifted slowly -- even as boneless and sated as he felt, the memories were too fresh to leave him unaffected.

Justin shook his head. "Far too long," he said sorrowfully. "Really, it's shocking the way you've neglected me."

JC couldn't help it; he threw his head back and laughed. When he'd recovered Justin had pushed himself away from his side of the tub and was right in front of him, his hands on JC's knees, leaning in. He looked enchanted, his smile soft and his eyes bright, and as JC leaned forward to kiss him Justin whispered, "I love to hear you laugh."

Justin's mouth was warm against his and his hands moved very slowly up JC's thighs until they curved around his hips. JC closed his eyes and opened his mouth, luxuriating in the feel of the smooth skin of Justin's shoulders under his hands, the way Justin's mouth coaxed his own open, the lazy slide of his tongue, the way his hands came out of the warm water to gently frame JC's face. JC wrapped his arms around Justin, sitting up to pull him closer, lost in the wonder and joy of having Justin close to him again.

He leaned back, using his thumbs to gently trace Justin's eyebrows, the clean lines of his face, the long straight nose. "Too long," he murmured in agreement, and Justin smiled. "It's very late," he added. "Do you want to sleep?"

"I can't sleep," Justin replied. "Not now. I'm too happy."

"Too happy to sleep," JC murmured, smiling. "You're like a little kid on Christmas."

"You know," Justin said wryly, "that's the second time tonight I've been told that." His smile was brilliant as he turned around, stretching out his long legs and leaning back against JC's chest. "I guess Christmas came early for me this year."

"For both of us," JC said gently. He slid his hands around Justin's waist and spread his fingers low on his abdomen, loving the way Justin sighed and squirmed closer. For a long time there was silence as they rested against each other.

"Speaking of Christmas," Justin murmured a while later. "I'm supposed to catch a plane to Memphis on Monday."

"Monday?" asked JC flatly, his hands curving possessively around Justin's warm, firm body. "That's tomorrow already."

"Yeah," Justin said slowly. "And I want to see my family, but now I kind of don't want to go." He twisted around to look up at JC. "What are you doing for Christmas?" he asked.

"We're staying in the city this year," JC said thoughtfully. "Everyone's flying in, and there's big thing at my parents' house."

"That'll be nice," Justin said hesitantly. His hands covered JC's as they wrapped around his torso and he leaned back against him with a sigh.

"Yeah," JC said without conviction. He dropped his head down to rest his lips on the warm skin of Justin's shoulders. He was a little surprised at how strongly the reminder of Justin's imminent trip to Tennessee upset him. He didn't want to be away from him, not this soon, he thought fiercely. He'd just gotten him back.

"Okay, I'm gonna say it," Justin said suddenly, twisting around to face him. "Because I think every problem we ever had was because we didn't say what we thought, or what we meant, and then misunderstandings happen and things go south. And I'm just, I mean -- getting to where we are now was really hard, and I don't want to have any misunderstandings between us. Not ever again. So I'm just going to say it, even if it's stupid. All right?"

JC blinked at him in surprise. Justin looked very determined, his eyebrows drawn together and his blue eyes intent. "Okay," he agreed slowly, and braced himself for whatever Justin was going to say.

Justin took a deep breath. "I don't want to be away from you. It's too soon, and I don't want to be away. I think," he paused and swallowed audibly. "I think you -- I want you to come to Tennessee with me for the holidays."

JC stared at him as warmth bloomed in his chest. "Well, I don't want to be away from you either," he said gently, and was rewarded by Justin's smile. "And you're right," he added. "We do need to try to talk more. Talking is, you know, smart." He reached out to pull Justin back into his arms, loving the way he leaned trustingly against him. "I can't disappoint my family, though, not after I didn't see them at Thanksgiving."

"No," Justin said immediately. "No, I see your point. I sort of feel the same way."

"Well, maybe we can compromise here."

Justin sat up again and nodded eagerly, fixing him with an earnest look that JC found completely irresistible. How could he have ever doubted Justin? How could he have wasted so much precious time this year?

JC continued. "Maybe I can come to Tennessee with you on Monday, and stay for a few days. And after Christmas you can come back to New York a little early, and spend New Year's with me. And," he hesitated for a moment, and then continued firmly. "And with my family."

Justin blinked owlishly at him, then smiled broadly. "Sure, I think that'll work," he said. "I know it will. I wonder if we can get you a ticket on the same flight I'm on. We can call the airline; aren't they open 24/7?"

JC, unbelievably, felt himself start to blush. "Well, you know, if the weather isn't too bad," he said, "Antaeus has a company jet that we'll be able to use."

Justin's smile faded, and then he shook his head. "I don't know, JC," he said slowly. "That sort of feels like I'm taking advantage.

"You're not," JC said quietly, reaching out for Justin and smiling contentedly as Justin leaned back to rest against him. "There's no way of getting a flight now, it's too close to Christmas. So, I'd be taking it to get to Tennessee anyway. You may as well come with me, and save your ticket for another trip home."

Justin took a deep breath and sighed, making a wry face. "I guess when you put it that way," he said. "But sometimes it's weird, you being so rich."

JC smiled into Justin's short, soft hair. "The jet is . . . well, it's not really a luxury," he murmured. "It's more of a job necessity. You'll get used to it."

Justin snorted a little. It wasn't a happy sound, and JC's hands stilled on his body.

"Actually, now that I think about it," Justin said quietly, "it might be my favorite corporate perk ever, especially if it makes it easier for you to get back to New York now and then."

JC frowned. "What do you mean?"

Justin shifted, burrowing closer. "You're going back to Antaeus. I'm guessing that means that you're not going to be here in New York very much, not after the first of the year."

"Oh, actually," JC started, and paused as Justin eased closer, his body warm and firm against his. Justin's hands were under the water, stroking slowly down the length of JC's thighs.

"Actually, what?" Justin asked quietly. His short nails scratched a shockingly erotic pattern on the thin skin behind JC's knees and JC stifled a moan.

"Um, I forgot what I was going to say," JC said distractedly. His hands tightened on Justin's waist, pulling him closer.

Justin dropped his head back to rest on JC's shoulder. "Something about corporate perks," he muttered, and his breath hitched as JC's mouth opened on the side of his throat. "We can talk

about it later, okay?"

JC moved his hands slowly, steadily lower, smoothing down Justin's stomach before letting his fingers cup and stroke. Justin moaned and squirmed encouragingly against him.

Then his hands went still and Justin made a small sound of protest. "Oh," JC said. "Now I remember."

"Oh no, not now," Justin replied. "I don't want to talk about it now." His fingers clenched on JC's thighs and his neck arched as JC slowly, slowly reached lower. "Oh god," he said, his eyes dropping closed. "Right there, yes. Fuck."

JC whispered Justin's name into his ear, smiling as he trembled. "It's nothing big," he said softly. "Just, um, I arranged to be based in New York City instead of Europe." Justin's body stilled under his hands and his fingers tightened on JC's thighs, digging in hard.

"Not Europe?" Justin asked breathlessly.

"No." JC used his hands to spread Justin's legs a little wider, his fingers lingering on the soft skin on the inside of his thighs. Justin's back arched and he gasped.

"How come?" he whispered.

JC eased himself closer to Justin's body and hissed at the delicious friction as his hands got busy again. "Thought you didn't want to talk about it now," he murmured, and grinned as Justin gasped.

"JC," he said. "C'mon."

JC took a deep breath. He slowed his movements and leaned closer so he whispered directly into Justin's ear. "I told my grandfather -- and the Antaeus board -- that I wanted to be based in New York City," he said softly. Justin was breathing heavily against him and it was more than just arousal. JC swallowed hard and continued. "I don't want to travel so much any more. I'll still have to do some, but there will be a lot less of it, and when I do go I won't be gone for such long periods of time."

"Why?" Justin whispered. "Why did you do that?"

JC tightened his arms around Justin and closed his eyes. His heart was pounding almost painfully, making it difficult to breathe. "Because I don't want to be away from here," he said quietly. "I told you before. I don't want to be away from you."

He felt Justin turn in his arms to face him, and when JC opened his eyes it was to Justin's huge smile and radiant blue eyes. "JC," he whispered, and then leaned forward to kiss him softly, lingeringly. "That's -- I'm so glad. That's how I feel, too." He wrapped his arms around him tightly, and as JC pulled Justin closer and relaxed into his arms he felt completely and utterly at peace. And happy.

"So," Justin murmured, squirming meaningfully against him. "What do you say we finish this, um, conversation in bed?"

"Good idea," JC said with a smile. "It’s late. You must be very tired," and against his shoulder he felt Justin muffle a snort.

"Oh, not exactly," he said with a laugh that sounded breathless. "But I don’t want to turn into a prune. Is your leg okay?" Justin continued with exaggerated concern. "You want me to carry you to bed?"

JC smiled and released Justin reluctantly. "Oh, shut up," he said. "It's not that bad."

Justin stepped out of the tub and reached for the towels on the counter. He shook one out and wrapped it around JC’s wet body, smiling.

"I don't know," Justin said, rubbing the towel gently over JC's face. "I was pretty worried about you. I thought you were in some serious pain, what with the groaning and everything."

"Yeah, well. The groaning didn’t have anything to do with the muscle pull," JC murmured. He tightened Justin's towel around him and pulled him close to his body, kissing him again and letting him feel his arousal. "Let's go to bed," he murmured against Justin's lips, grinning as Justin nodded breathlessly and started to pull JC toward the bedroom.

"Are you gonna kick me out at dawn?" Justin asked, his eyes alight with mischief.

"Are you going to sneak out before I wake up?" JC countered, allowing himself to be drawn to the side of the bed, watching Justin pull the covers down and turn to tug the towel off his body.

Justin regarded him, his smile dropping away as he reached out to touch JC's naked hip. "Um, no," he said breathlessly, and then cleared his throat. "I mean, I'm not. Leaving, I mean. What I mean is, if you're here, than I'm not going anywhere." He glanced at JC, his eyes serious over his slight smile.

JC smiled back at him, taking his hand and coaxing him into his bed, pulling the sheet over them and sighing as their bodies moved easily together. "No, you’re not," he murmured, feeling Justin's arms wrap tightly around him. "And neither am I."

~ End

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